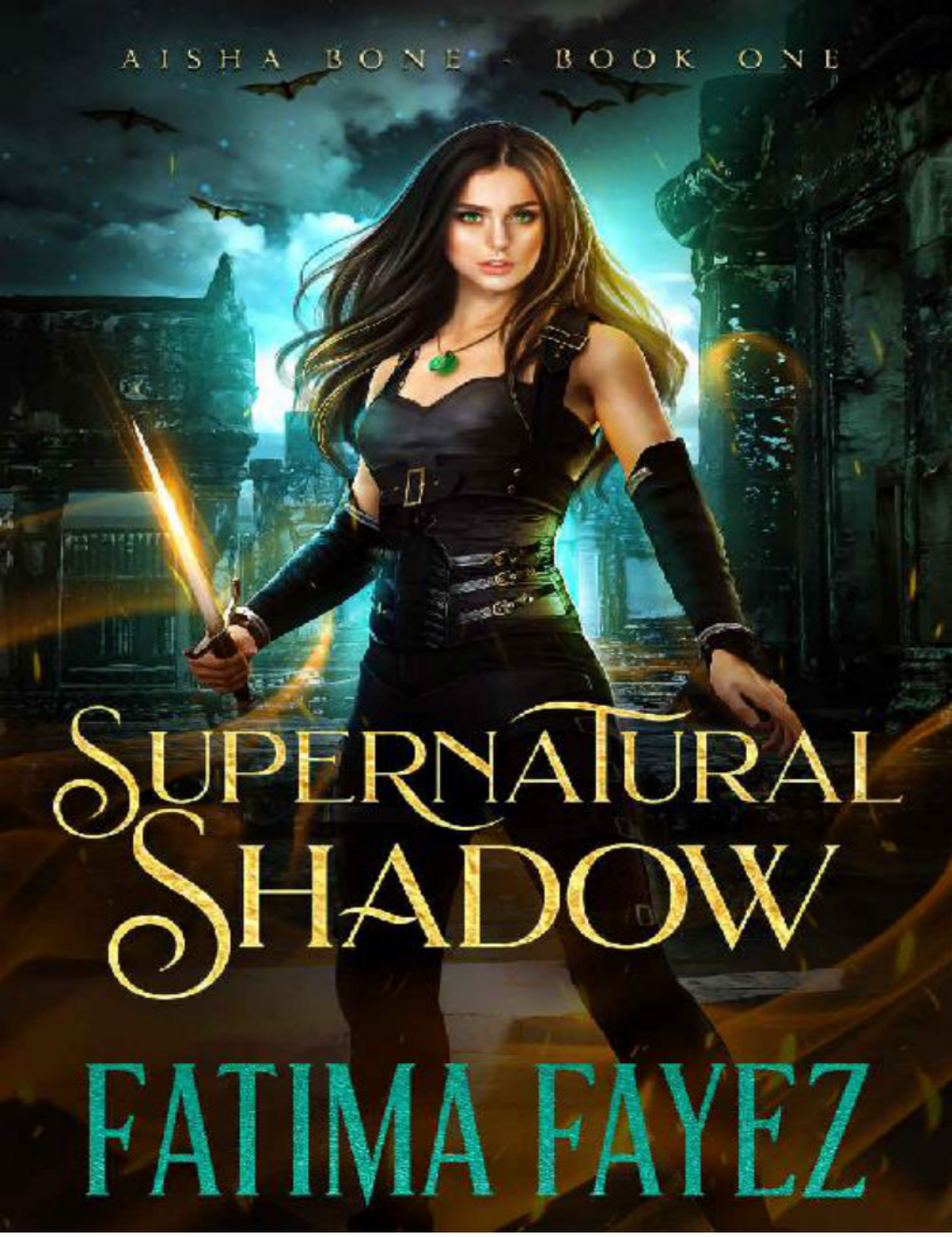
AISHA BONE - BOOK ONE
SUPERNATURAL SHADOW
FATIMA FAYEZ

Copyright © 2021 by Fatima Fayez

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Art designed by Covers by Juan

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41

Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48

Chapter One

I looked down at my broken dagger, then back up to the asshole who had destroyed its blade. This was the third time this week a shifter had pissed me off. "Did you seriously just break my dagger?"

I glared at the wolf. His yellow eyes glimmered back at me. The assignment had been to retrieve the shifter alive, but right now I was very tempted to kill him.

"Just turn yourself in and no one will get hurt," I said, trying to be calm. I ran my thumb along my damaged weapon and idly wondered if it could be salvaged. It had an engraved 'A' for my name, Aisha, although at the moment it could easily stand for Annoyed. This wolf was seriously ticking me off. I had a job to do, and he wasn't making it easy. "The bounty's for you to be delivered alive. Keep fighting me, and I can't guarantee you'll walk away from this."

The shifter lowered his head and growled at me. He had transformed into a wolf as soon as I'd exposed my dagger, using his most powerful fighting body. I had to make do with the one I had. As a half-witch, I was supposed to be weaker than the shifter, but my unknown father's blood had given me speed and strength that regular witches couldn't claim.

I reached deep inside me for my magic and let go of the line. It was reassuring to know that my power was there, but I was determined to win this fight without it.

The surrounding buildings were dark at this time of night. I circled the shifter in the dim courtyard. The wolf followed my motions, his hackles raised. It had been a while since I'd fought a shifter in wolf-form, but I was sure I could best him. He may have strength and power on his side, but I had training and skills on mine.

"You want to play? Let's play." I tossed the remains of the broken dagger to his feet and his head swung toward it. With my left hand, I swiftly removed another dagger from the sheath strapped to my back and ran toward him.

The distraction of the clattering metal served to keep his jaws away from me long enough to get close. He spun around and growled, rushing at me. I slid to the floor and swiped at him. I managed to cut his side, and he yelped, jumping away. I rolled to my feet, my dagger thrust in front of me. The wolf jumped at me, his teeth snapping at me. He was angry and in pain — a dangerous combination, but one I

wanted nonetheless. Pain and anger made people and supernaturals more volatile. His emotions would cause him to make mistakes, and mistakes would serve me well.

I dodged him, aiming a kick at his midsection. My foot connected with his body, and he yelped once more. He reached his paw out and managed to slice through my jeans. I bit back a yell — I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. I whispered a chant under my breath to knit my wound.

It wasn't *really* cheating. Shifters regenerate quickly, and his wound was already closing. With their ability to heal so quickly, shifters could only be bested by knocking them out. And if the shifter was wearing a magic dispeller, then even magic wouldn't be able to do that. The next best option was to use something heavy to whack them in the head, but then you risked giving them brain damage or outright death. Shifters weren't immune to that. It was one of the great mysteries: their flesh and internal wounds could heal quickly, but their brains were just as vulnerable to injury as a normal human's.

"You're messing with the wrong supernatural," the shifter growled at me.

"Actually, you're messing with the wrong bounty hunter. I'm giving you a solid out. Stop fighting me and allow me to turn you in. My client will be happy, you live, and I get paid. Why are you being so stubborn about it?" I balanced the dagger in my hand. "It's almost like you *want* to be killed."

"They'll never get me alive," he snarled, and lunged.

I turned to the side and slashed at him. I hacked at the air as he executed a move I had never seen before. His body twisted away from me, and I used my shoulder to knock into him. His teeth were awfully close to my neck. I lowered my head to protect it and used my left hand to drive the sharp edge of my blade into his stomach. A howl escaped from his throat. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, but I didn't let go. His paws clawed at me, trying to get me off him, but I persisted in dragging my weapon through him. I tore him open, pulling out his intestines. I had to slow him down enough to apprehend him.

He looked down at his gaping midsection, then up at me. Fury and defiance burned in his eyes. Before I could stop him, he tore out his intestines completely, severing his innards from his body. I let go of him and pulled away my blade, stunned. He slumped to the floor and started laughing. I stared at him in bewilderment. "Fire and brimstone! Why did you do that?"

His breath was labored, but there was a glint of satisfaction in his tone. "I told you they'll never get me alive. Tell him I won."

There had been no reason to his madness. Whatever the client had

wanted this shifter for couldn't be worth the price of his life. I watched the blood pool around his body. His breathing grew more and more strained until it rattled, and he didn't breathe again. His eyes rolled back into his head as the life left his slumped form.

It was unfortunate. I had hoped to get him back alive, but he didn't make it easy to keep him that way. I pulled out my phone from my back pocket and took a photo of the body, which I then sent to my client. I waited until I heard the telltale beep, letting me know the funds had reached my account.

I retrieved both pieces of my shattered dagger and looked down at them. Maybe I could fix it. I twisted my lips ruefully, or I could simply use one of the other daggers I owned. I had an army's worth of weapons stashed at home. It was time to choose a new favorite blade.

A howl sounded from the distance. I shoved the pieces in my pocket and made my way out of the courtyard before the other shifters found me.

Chapter Two

"Hello, Aisha." The nymph behind the counter brightened when she saw me.

"Hi, Sandra." It was midnight, and I was at the bounty office. Technically the bounty office never closed, but I never made it a habit of coming by so late. I was restless after the incident with the shifter and couldn't head back home. Sandra was the bounty office's front desk assistant. She sat at her desk in the lobby and greeted everyone who stepped through the door. Much like Javier, the owner of this bounty office, Sandra always seemed to be there.

"What brings you here at this hour?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "I was feeling restless. I thought I would come in and see if you had any new jobs for me."

She pointed a thumb toward Javier's office. "He'll be glad to see his favorite bounty hunter."

"I bet you say that to all the others," I teased her. Sandra always joked that I was Javier's favorite bounty hunter. She said it was because I took up as little of his time as possible. I did my job and didn't harass him for premium bounties the way that the other bounty hunters did.

The nymph shook her head. "Not at all." She paused, violet eyes sparkling. "Well, maybe I tell a couple of the others."

I grinned. "I don't think I have to guess which ones."

"Oh shoo, go bother the old man." Sandra couldn't hide the smile on her face.

There were a limited number of licensed bounty offices in Barcelona. Some bounty offices were simply places for troublemakers, but Javier ran a respectable business. That was the reason I had registered to work for him. His office had serious bounty hunters on the roster — professionals who loved the thrill of the hunt. Then there were people like me, who had taken on this job simply because they were skilled at it.

Well, that was the reason I'd given Javier. The real reason was because bounty hunting provided a legitimate front for my side business and interest in weaponry.

I strolled down the long hallway leading to Javier's office. The walls on both sides were covered with bulletin boards. On them were notices for open bounties. I glanced at each one as I walked past. I

rarely took a bounty posted on the bulletin boards, but I always hoped for the day when something interesting would be up there.

Javier usually kept a select list of bounties for me that he considered high-skill catches, or ones with higher payouts. Every bounty office's reputation was impacted by the number of hunters who managed to catch their targets.

I slowed down. On the walls near Javier's door were several large posters of ASP's top twenty most-wanted fugitives. I stopped and stared at one in particular.

The Alliance of Supernatural Protectors, commonly known as ASP or the Alliance, was the one of the few formal agencies in the supernatural world with the power to hold magical beings accountable for breaking the law. The Alliance's mandate was also to keep our existence concealed from humans.

The supernatural world was pretty much self-regulated. There were mechanisms in place for all subgroups. Witches and wizards were usually members of covens. Each coven had different rules, but their overall mandates were the same: *harm no humans.*

Other than magic users like witches, wizards, and warlocks, the largest groups of supernaturals were made up of vampires and shifters.

Vampires were held accountable by their Vampire Council. Vampires didn't allow other supernaturals to interfere in their issues. They had a strict hierarchy based on bloodlines, and each vampire knew their place.

Unlike the vampires, the shifters were more fluid with their hierarchy. Power ruled the packs. Each shifter pack had a different alpha, and other positions were determined by pure strength. The leader of all the shifter packs in Barcelona and the outer areas was Diego, a dragon shifter. I'd never met him, but his reputation was a fierce one. It had to be to ensure he remained at the top of the shifter power pyramid.

As a half-witch, I didn't belong to a coven, but I was held to the same rule as all paranormal beings: *don't reveal supernaturals to the human world.* Exposing our presence was a risk to us all.

The Alliance worked to ensure that the hidden world wasn't revealed, but they were also interested in pursuing dark magic users and investigating murders. They looked into anything unexplained that was magical in nature.

I browsed the Alliance's top twenty most-wanted fugitives. They varied from criminals who had escaped prison to those who hadn't been arrested yet.

Number three on their list hadn't moved in some time. In place of a photograph of the suspect, only a dark outline greeted me. And

written in bold lettering at the top of the poster:

WANTED: SUPERNATURAL SHADOW.

Beneath the silhouette, a lengthy list of alleged crimes was attributed to this Supernatural Shadow. Almost all were high-profile assassinations — thirty-three in total. The only non-assassination was one charge of thievery, but it didn't state what had been stolen. It amused me to read the poster whenever I was in the office and see if there were any additions to the list of misdemeanors and felonies. The Alliance was desperate to catch the Supernatural Shadow; they had bounties at all the regional offices.

Personally, I had my money on the Supernatural Shadow. I shook my head and allowed myself a small smile.

I left the poster and walked into Javier's office.

The dwarf was hunched over his desk, surrounded by a dozen files and a mountain of papers. His bald head reflected the overhead light. The lack of hair on his head made his long beard more prominent. It fell to his chest in thick waves, tied at the end with a red string. Had his facial hair not been enough to give away his dwarven blood, his heavyset features, sturdy frame, and height — or lack thereof — would have identified his heritage at once. He was jotting down something on a yellow legal pad. As I walked closer, I saw that he was writing down numbers in columns.

Javier looked up at my entrance and frowned, his deep-set eyes narrowing. "Back so soon?"

He had given me the shifter job a week ago. The requested date of completion had been three weeks.

"Bad news." I slipped into the seat across from his desk.

He put his pen down. "What is it?"

"The shifter's dead." I didn't bother giving Javier a long story or lame excuses. One of the things I liked best about him was how practical he was.

"That's unfortunate." Javier leaned back in his chair. "It would have paid better if you had brought him in alive. There was no way around it?"

I shook my head. "I tried to knock him out with a few spells when I first spotted him, but he was wearing a magic dispeller." Magic dispellers did as advertised: they deflected magic. Supernaturals wore them to ward off unwanted spells and incantations. The really paranoid types wore dozens of them on their wrists and around their necks. If you thought humans were suspicious of magic, you hadn't seen a supernatural conspiracy theorist.

Supernaturals who were on the run frequently wore dispellers to make it more difficult for magic users to capture them. That was one of the reasons I didn't depend on my magic for work. Dispellers made

the job more challenging, but I enhanced my other fighting skills to balance my odds. Of course, it also meant there was a higher likelihood that the supernaturals I was fighting would wind up dead.

"Sometimes I wonder if you remember you're a bounty hunter and not an assassin," Javier said, a wry smile softening his rugged features. "I crunched the numbers the other day, and your statistics show a slightly higher body count than the other bounty hunters."

"He pulled out his own intestines," I pointed out. "And anyway, some of the bounties ask for them to be returned dead."

"True, but it's usually it's dead *or* alive." Javier ran a hand over his face and let out a heavy sigh. "It's not ideal, but I know you would have done your best to keep him alive. I'll deal with the client." Sometimes the clients caused trouble afterward. It wasn't like Javier could bring the bodies back to life, and the bounty was dealt with, so I wasn't sure why clients complained at all.

"Got anything else for me?" I asked.

"Eager to go back out hunting? If there's one thing I love about you, Aisha, it's your insatiable work ethic. I wish more of my good-for-nothing bounty hunters were like you," Javier grumbled. He was flattering me; all of his staff were excellent. He turned to his left and pulled open a drawer. He extracted a file from within, closed the drawer, and faced me again. "Let's see what I have for you."

He flipped through the sheets, perusing each one.

I tapped my foot on the floor. "What have you got?" I asked after he had gone through half the stack.

He frowned. "I hadn't expected you back so soon. I was thinking of handing these to Luke or Tahani."

Luke and Tahani were the other top bounty hunters working for Javier. We weren't friends, merely coworkers. We barely got along. The impression I received from them was that they considered me a rival, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get the job done, get my money, and go home.

"Here," Javier said, giving up. He pushed the stack toward me. "Go through them and choose."

I leaned forward and browsed through the open bounties. Each sheet listed the job, the client, and the pay. It included criteria for the bounty, such as returned alive or dead, in addition to preferred method of killing should the client want the latter, as well as specific drop-off locations if the client didn't want us to put the bounty in a holding cell until the client showed up to collect them. Each job was different — that's what kept the work interesting.

I quickly scanned the sheets. There was an outstanding reward for a succubus who was making trouble. I recognized her because I had caught her a few months ago, and she was more trouble than the pay

was worth. I continued flipping the papers. Several demons needed capture. There were always plenty of those, since demons were no one's favorite. They were tricky bastards, but easy money. I hunted them so often that most of my clothes smelled like brimstone. A rogue gnome was wanted for outstanding child support payments. An unlicensed necromancer was wanted by the Alliance with the last-known address provided. The Alliance regularly outsourced jobs to bounty offices; it didn't have the manpower to track down every supernatural. I tried to avoid their jobs since the pay wasn't that great, and I didn't want them to get to know me.

Javier frequently tried to encourage me to take Alliance open bounties, but the jobs weren't worth it. He kept those jobs for his top bounty hunters to show the Alliance that he had a superior staff. I believed the dwarf enjoyed rubbing it in the Alliance's face that his team could locate people that their organization couldn't. I always left those jobs to Luke and Tahani.

The other open bounties were for witches and wizards who owed money, fae conmen, and trolls that had caused trouble and were hiding out. Taking a troll bounty was a fool's burden, especially since most were requests to bring them back alive. Trolls were notoriously difficult to transport, and they smelled worse than demons. At least I was nose-blind with demon-smell since my clothes always reeked of brimstone, but with trolls even I could smell their stink.

There weren't any vampires or shifters in the stack of bounties. It was rare to see them. The last shifter I had taken was a random occurrence. The pack took care of its own, and the vampires were a secretive bunch who tended to take care of their issues their way. They didn't air their dirty laundry.

"I don't really see anything I'm interested in." None of them seemed like a challenge.

"Take that demon." Javier pointed at a sheet close to him. "It pays well enough, and it will be a breeze for you."

I scanned the sheet. An average-looking guy stared back at me. Donnie the demon. Bounty open for reneging on an outstanding loan. Wanted alive.

"Okay, I'll do it." They might be tricky and stink, but demons were my specialty. I grabbed the paper, and Javier logged onto his computer to list me as on the job.

"I'll be seeing you." I got up from my chair and left Javier's office.

He called out after me. "Don't kill him! They pay more when you bring them back alive."

That was going to be a problem. My favorite kind of demon was a dead demon.

Chapter Three

Each bounty I accepted started the same way. First, I had to get the job from Javier. Then, I had to do the research. Lastly, I caught my target.

It was the part in between the research and catching the target that was most exciting for me. I relied on an elite, handpicked network in Barcelona to help me get the information I needed, comprised of three contacts.

I headed over to the one person who could acquire all of the demon's financial records: Ibrahim.

Ibrahim and I had met after my roommate, Noor, introduced us. As the daughter of an angel and demon, Noor had learned early on to seek out friendships wherever and whenever possible, since both communities had shunned her. As a result, I was exposed to a lot of supernaturals that I wouldn't have formed friendships with elsewhere, such as vampires like Ibrahim.

Ibrahim spent a lot of time at my favorite restaurant, Miguel's. I often shared a table with him when I took a lunch break. He was one of my few vampire friends. Our relationship was more transactional, but he could be relied on for information for free. Some of the time.

Ibrahim lived alone in a big house in Eixample. It was some distance away from the bounty office. I drove when I had to travel long distances, but I preferred to walk around the city or use public transportation for local adventures.

I took the metro and walked the rest of the way to his house. It was a cool September night, so I pulled my jacket closer to my body and enjoyed the fresh breeze.

I admired the beautiful homes in the affluent neighborhood. It was quiet this late at night, and I kept to the shadows to avoid suspicion if someone happened to be awake and looking out the window.

I knocked when I got to his front door, but there was no answer. I waited a few minutes and debated if I wanted to track him down at Miguel's, but decided against it. I took out a pad from within my jacket and wrote down my request for information. I slipped the note under his door. Ibrahim hated technology and was useless when it came to communication by phone or email. Getting in touch with him always had to be done the old-fashioned way. Payments for jobs were always sent to my email, but I didn't know if he did it himself or someone else did it for him. Sometimes I wondered if he just didn’t

want to make it easy for me to reach him. Vampires were contrary that way.

Satisfied that he would find the note whenever he returned home, I turned away from Ibrahim's front door and put my hands in my pockets. My fingertips traced the cold, steel edge of my daggers. It was a reassuring feeling. As desperate as I was for my own bed, I had to make one more stop before I went home: the Gothic Quarter.

My other network was the gargoyles.

I decided to take the long way to the Gothic Quarter and strolled across the long strip of Avinguda Diagonal and then down Passeig de Gràcia. The street was empty, all the boutiques long closed for the day. I glanced at the overpriced fashions in the window displays. The sidewalks outside Gaudí's most famous buildings were clear of gawkers in long lines. I reached the end of the street by El Corte Inglés, Spain's largest department store, and decided to walk down Las Ramblas.

Easily the most popular street for tourists, the long stretch was littered with small stores selling Barcelonan souvenirs during the day, but at this time of night it was nearly abandoned. No tourists crowded the streets, no pickpockets lurked to take advantage of a careless visitor. All the artists and performers had packed up their gear and disappeared, only to show up bright and early in the morning. The only time I voluntarily ventured down Las Ramblas during the daytime was to visit La Boqueria. I loved the market, and nothing could keep me away, not even the crowds.

Halfway down Las Ramblas, I took a left and stepped into the winding alleys that made up the Gothic Quarter. I enjoyed wandering around its labyrinthine streets. The area was full of history and rich architecture, much like the rest of Barcelona, but the best part about the place was that it was closed to vehicular traffic, so walking was the preferred method of travel. I reached the square and gazed up at the Barcelona Cathedral. The roof was full of gargoyles shaped of ordinary and mythical creatures.

Most of the gargoyles would be asleep at this hour, but Mateu was always up for anything. I went to his home, a bridge where he overlooked passing pedestrians. His eyes were closed.

"Mateu. Wake up," I called up to the dozing gargoyle.

His eyes blinked open. "What are you doing here?"

"Come on down and I'll tell you."

He climbed down from the bridge, and we walked away from the cathedral. I didn't want the other gargoyles to overhear our conversation. They were notorious gossips, and there was no need for word to reach the demon that I was after him. I'd had bounties leave the country as soon as they found out I was coming for them. I

preferred to get the job done locally.

"What's the talk around the cathedral?" I asked Mateu as we made our way through the streets around the giant building.

"It's been dull. No salacious gossip." Mateu shrugged. "Well, no more than the usual. The latest chatter has been about the new intake."

"New intake?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"The dragon shifters' program. The other gargoyles are excited to have new humans to talk to."

Each year, the dragon shifters opened up the opportunity for humans to enter the magical world through an extensive interview and training process. It was one of the few exceptions to exposing the supernatural world to humans. A while back, a committee of supernaturals voted on allowing the program's existence, and it had been approved. The program trained select humans to accept the supernatural so that the supernatural community could make use of them later, when they grew up and took on important roles in the human community. Humans might not know about the supernaturals, but we manipulated human politics and relations every day.

"That should be nice for you," I said. The gargoyle loved to meet new people. "Anything else?"

"The vampires are quiet, as usual. You never hear a whisper from them. There are rumors we're going to be exposed."

"Those rumors resurface every few months." I waved him off. I used to hear these rumors and more all the time from my ex-boyfriend, Sebastian.

Mateu shook his head. "Something feels different this time."

"What do you mean?" I trusted Mateu's instincts.

"I'm not sure. I just have a strange feeling about this one. The chatter seems a little more focused."

I frowned. The threat of exposure affected all of us. "Let me know if you hear more."

Every few months or so, there would be someone new who insisted that we should reveal our presence to humans. The consensus from our society was that supernaturals should remain hidden. There were some exceptions, like the dragon shifters' program, but overall revelation of our world was absolutely controlled. The Alliance of Supernatural Protectors even had a special unit focused on suppressing human awareness of supernaturals. From time to time, though, they'd slipped up. That was how humans found out about witches and tried to burn them at the stake throughout history.

My ex-boyfriend had been a huge supporter of supernaturals revealing themselves to the humans. It was one of the few things we vehemently disagreed on. He justified it by thinking that supernaturals

and humans could work together and mutually benefit from the relationship. Or maybe he had more sinister thoughts and wanted to force humans into submission. But there was a reason we remained hidden: if humans knew they were no longer at the top of the food chain, they would make it their mission to destroy us. I had no doubt about that.

Mateu and I finally left the gargoyles' vicinity as we reached the small square where the stores were.

"Are you going to tell me now what it is you want?" Mateu asked.

"I thought you would enjoy a nighttime stroll with me." I pouted.

"Yes, I always appreciate being woken up late just so somebody can ask me for a favor." His words dripped with irony.

"You love gossip more than sleep," I teased him. I knew that the gargoyle loved helping me. He'd saved my skin in the past, and in return, I always came to him with choice gossip gleaned from my experiences.

"You're right there," he chuckled. "What do you need?"

"Do you know this demon? I need information on him." I showed him the sheet of paper Javier had given me.

Mateu studied the paper and shook his head. "No, I've never seen him before. What's he done?"

"The usual. Skipped out on his debts. People want to collect."

"I'll ask around," he said.

"Could you have something for me by tomorrow night?"

"What's the hurry? What happened to the shifter you were tracking?"

"I found him."

Mateu gave me a speculative look. "Did he make it out alive?"

I shook my head.

"You're going to get in trouble with the dragon shifters," Mateu snorted.

"He was a wolf," I reassured him.

The gargoyle rolled his shoulders. "He's still one of Diego's."

"I've killed shifters before. No one's come after me." I paused. "Besides, this one kind of killed himself."

Mateu tilted his head. "What?"

"He pulled out his own intestines. It was very dramatic and pointless." I shrugged. "So it doesn't really count as my kill."

"I don't think Diego will split the difference. Be careful," Mateu warned.

"Thanks. I appreciate your advice," I said in a solemn tone.

Mateu snorted at my words. He knew I wouldn't listen. He scratched an ear. "The Alliance is investigating a serial killer."

I frowned. "Why haven't I heard about this?"

“They’re keeping details quiet. They don’t want members of the community to panic.”

“How did you learn about it?”

The gargoyle smirked. “I have my sources.”

Mateu’s sources were one of the reasons I kept returning to him for information. His deep relationships within the community afforded him access to details that I could never attain. I trusted him; on two occasions, his information had saved my life. We had since developed an easy friendship with a mutual respect for the other.

“What kind of serial killer? Who does he target?” I asked him. He sat up and told me what he knew. I waited until he finished to ask my question. “Is the Alliance certain that this serial killer will continue to operate in Barcelona?”

He shrugged. “That’s what they’re looking into now.”

“If you come across anything that sounds like it’s part of this case, let me know.”

“I will,” I promised Mateu. "Want me to walk you back?"

"I think I'll stay here for some time."

I waved at him and left, making my way back home. I lived in the neighborhood across the street from the Gothic Quarter. I crossed Via Laietana and made my way through the crooked streets of El Born, passing the Santa Maria del Mar Cathedral as I mulled over my thoughts. I passed street cleaners washing away the day's dirt, kiosk managers closing up their carts, and love-struck couples taking a late-night stroll. Somewhere in Barcelona there were always people up and about, no matter what time it was. It was one of the things I loved most about the city.

As I turned the corner, I chanted under my breath, throwing on an invisibility spell. It was a habit when returning home. Home meant safety, and I took precautions to ensure it remained that way.

My mother had taught me that just because you didn't see anyone following you didn't mean there wasn't someone there. She had always been paranoid, telling me it was better to be paranoid than to be dead. I tried not to live my life being terrified of my surroundings, but I found that I could never feel entirely comfortable without a little bit of awareness to keep me alert.

And after all, I knew I was being hunted.

Chapter Four

I slept in the next day. I deserved it after working a long shift. It was late, and I only allowed myself a minute of staring at the ceiling before I rolled out of bed. Pulling open a drawer, I grabbed a sports bra, a wrinkled t-shirt, socks, and leggings. I slipped them on and wore my workout sneakers. I grabbed two daggers from the vanity table and went to the roof to start my morning training ritual.

Just because I'd had a long night didn't mean I could skip my daily workout.

An hour and a half later, I stepped into the shower. My entire body was drenched in sweat. I let the water run over my aching muscles as I thought about the coming day. I'd have to pass by Mateu later that evening, and Ibrahim usually needed twenty-four hours to get me information. I had some free time until then.

I hated having free time.

I stayed in the shower long enough for my fingers to pucker. I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around my body. I left my wavy hair alone to air-dry. I padded into the living room and dropped onto the couch. It was time to see if I could find some other work to keep myself busy. I picked up my laptop from the coffee table, pulled up a website, and typed in my username, *Shadow,* to log in.

Being a bounty hunter was just my side job. It paid peanuts compared to my main work.

The website had pages of job opportunities. A lot of the headlines begged for the Supernatural Shadow to take on the offers. I suspected many of these were set up by the Alliance. My mother's words came back to me: *better paranoid than dead.*

The website was a board for assassins and hitmen. It was how I acquired the bulk of my wealth.

I didn't find anything that was worth the risk. For me, taking on assassination jobs wasn't just about the money. I had managed to build quite the decent nest egg from previous jobs, and my monthly expenses weren't high. If I wanted to, I could retire today and still have enough to live on comfortably for the rest of my life. I had several high-profile assassinations to thank for that.

Despite what some people thought, I didn't kill for the money. I took jobs because of the challenges they presented. I enjoyed

complicated assignments — but of course, only the high-paying ones, not ones with high risk and low return. I needed the job to be just enough to ensure my training was still sound.

My mother had trained me to be the best at what I did — killing. Because of her paranoia, I had a childhood filled with dead bodies. She hated demons with a passion and trained me to go after them at every opportunity. Thanks to her training, I could spot a demon in a crowd immediately. Other than a shifter, no one was better at spotting a demon than me. But shifters had their noses to rely on. Once, after a demon bounty, I had asked a shifter what demons smelled like, and he had replied, "Like you, except with less cloves," and laughed heartily.

That's how I discovered that demons smelled like brimstone.

I used that knowledge by mixing some of my clothes in my roommate's closet. I wondered from time to time what my mother would think of me living with a half-demon. I was pretty sure she would be upset, but I knew she would be impressed by my ruse. When I wore clothing I'd stored in my roommate's closet, any shifter that attempted to track me when I was on the job would be thrown off by the double scent of cloves and brimstone. I knew I had been successful when I asked that same shifter later what I smelled like, and he confirmed it was cloves and brimstone.

"Fire and brimstone," I cursed under my breath. I shut down my laptop, not having found anything worthwhile. I picked up my phone. A message was waiting for me from my roommate, Noor.

Lunch?

Sure. Miguel's? I wrote back.

Now?

I glanced at the time. *Be there in fifteen.*

It didn't take me long to get dressed. I made sure my daggers were accessible and hidden from view as I tucked them snug into their sheaths concealed in my belt. A spell camouflaged them against my clothes to keep humans from spotting my weapons.

I locked up and left the apartment. It was a beautiful day outside. The sun shone with a few scattered clouds, which kept the air comfortably cool. The streets bustled with tourists, and the local shops and restaurants were active in catering to patrons' needs. Some people hated living in El Born due to the high tourist population, but I enjoyed seeing all walks of life descend onto the area to visit the museums, historic cathedrals, and soak in the culture. El Born had unique boutiques and some of the most interesting graffiti around. Street artists, even the punk kids with cans of spray paint, were always influenced by the inspiration of Picasso and Dalí in the air.

Miguel's was only five minutes away. Noor worked close by in a tattoo parlor. It was on the far side of El Born, away from our

apartment. I waved at a few store owners and smiled as I walked by the crowded tapas restaurants. Those places were always busy.

I spotted Noor as soon as I walked in. She was sitting at a table for two, reading a menu. I didn't know why, since we had both memorized the menu because we came here so often. Her long hair was loose, falling in soft waves over her shoulders. At a glance, it was easy to tell that she was something…different. Her hair was a combination of raven-black locks and white-blonde streaks. Each strand was different. The contrast was certainly eye-catching, and devastating to men.

Due to her parentage, Noor was considered an outsider amongst other supernaturals, much like I was. Our common isolation was the paranormal society. It wasn't considered acceptable for demons to fall in love with angels, or vice versa. The product of that love was Noor. Her parents were very much still together and attributed the longevity of their relationship to the adage that opposites attract. Unfortunately, that same logic wasn't held true in the supernatural community. Noor was considered an anomaly. It didn't help that she didn't have any siblings.

"Late morning?" Noor asked me as she took in my outfit while I slid into the empty chair. Her blue eyes held a mischievous sparkle. Noor's mind frequently resided in the gutter, a quality she attributed to her half-demon side.

"Yeah," I replied. "How's work? The streets seem busy."

"It's okay. A group of tourists came in and gave us a lot of business."

The tattoo parlor was highly rated on popular travel recommendation websites, so they were never looking for clients. They had enough local customers, but tourists kept them busier than the other places.

"Ever think you'll get bored of working there?" It amazed me that of all the things Noor could have done with her life she'd chosen to work there, especially with the opportunities she had to go into her family business. Then again, who was I kidding? My life choices left a lot to be desired.

"Never." Noor gestured at the waitress.

The waitress appeared at the table. Noor beamed at Keke. "Can I get Miguel's special burger and some *patatas bravas*?"

"Sure thing." Keke jotted it down on her pad. She took the menu from Noor and glanced at me. "Your usual?"

"Yes." My regular lunch was a mixed salad, the grilled salmon, and a large bottle of water. I didn't need a menu.

Keke gave me a nod and left to place our order.

As we waited for our food, Noor and I talked about small, pleasant

topics like her parents. They lived on the outskirts of Barcelona, and Noor visited them from time to time. She had been there last weekend. I loved hearing about their life. Unlike me, Noor had grown up with parents who wanted her to have a proper childhood and, as a result, they had sheltered her from the supernatural community. Despite their attempts at shielding her from her true heritage, Noor nonetheless witnessed much from her parents' peers, and she was bitter at the behavior she witnessed from their communities. She was telling me a story about a sweet thing her father had done for her mother when our food arrived. I thanked the waitress. Keke gave me a bright smile and walked away.

Miguel's was a popular destination for supernaturals, especially in El Born, where a lot of us lived. It was hidden from human view, so they couldn't see the storefront even if they walked right up to the door. There were plenty of stores and restaurants like that in the area. They were simply spelled from human eyes.

His place was one of the rare areas where all kinds of supernaturals could coexist without friction. Nobody ever made trouble at Miguel's. There was something about the owner that made people respect his space. Miguel was a shifter and usually worked behind the bar. He was polishing a few glasses as we ate. I didn't know what he turned into, and I knew that he was strong enough to be an alpha, but he didn't seem to want the power. He didn't cause other males to be aggressive, and further, managed to gain their respect with a simple look. It was an incredible skill. Perhaps *that* was his alpha ability.

"I love this place. I'm glad you suggested lunch," Noor said in between bites. Her words piqued my attention, since she had been the one to ask me to lunch. She smiled. "I would have been completely ignored if I sat here *by myself*. I'm glad you're keeping me company." She accentuated the last few words.

Her words were clues. Someone was watching me. They hadn't been inside or observing her while she waited for me, but now that I was here, their eyes were on me. The fact that Noor didn't say exactly that out loud meant that my secret admirer was a shifter. Shifters had enhanced hearing, and Noor was cautious and smart enough to act accordingly.

Noor put her burger on her plate and stretched her hands on the tabletop. I glanced down at her hands on the table. She flexed eight fingers against the table, which meant that the person staring at me was located at my eight o'clock. She reached out to grab her fork and missed. The fork clattered on to the floor.

"I'll get that." I bent down to pick it up and used the opportunity to sneak a glance at my observer.

His head was turned away from us, so I couldn't get a good look at his face. He had dark hair and broad shoulders.

I straightened up and put the fork on the table. I gestured for Keke to get Noor another fork.

Noor nodded at me; that was him. She took a bite out of her burger. "I think we should go on a double date."

"You've got to stop with that." I wasn't sure if she was still talking in code or actually trying to convince me to go on a blind date. She had been nagging me about going out for a few months now, but I just wasn't interested.

"Come on, you haven't dated since forever," she whined.

"We both know how that turned out." I poured some water into my glass.

"You can't stop dating because your ex was horrible." She straightened as her eyes darted to my follower, then back to me. "The guy I'm thinking of is really good looking." She raised her eyebrow. She meant the shifter observing me.

"I'm sure he is."

"I think he's the best-looking guy I've ever seen."

"Really?" I took a sip of my water. "Remind me, how long have you been thinking about setting me up?" Our conversation had shifted entirely to my shadow, but to a casual listener we were still talking about dates. In reality, I was asking her how long the shifter had been watching me. Noor was keen enough to pick up on my meaning.

"Since you walked in," she answered.

"I'm interested in finding out more about him later."

"It might be too late by then." Noor had suggested he was about to leave.

I changed the topic and told her about visiting Mateu. Noor's eyes lit up. She loved the gargoyle. She told me a funny story about what he had done the last time he visited her at the tattoo parlor. We finished the meal, and I told her I'd see her back home. As I turned to leave, I noticed the shifter was indeed gone.

Noor shook her head, echoing my own thoughts that the shifter might still be nearby. Part of the reason we got along so well was because we were both paranoid in our own ways. I had lucked out with her as a roommate and best friend.

"Call me in an hour?" Noor's expression was worried.

"Sure," I said.

I left Miguel's wondering why someone was following me, and if it had anything to do with yesterday's dead shifter.

Chapter Five

"Are you going to be okay?" Noor asked me one last time before we parted ways. "You'll call me in an hour?"

"I'll be fine. I don't feel like going home. I'll go for a walk to stretch my legs. I'll probably continue my workout on the beach."

Noor nodded, her eyes serious. She knew what my morning workouts involved. "Call me when you're done?"

"I will." I was almost certain that the shifter would follow me. He may have thought he would be more inconspicuous by leaving the restaurant before we did.

Noor leaned forward to give me a hug and left for the tattoo parlor. I watched her leave. She had tried a few times to convince me to give up my bounty work and stop working as an assassin. She hated the idea of me fighting and the risk of injury, or worse, but it was too ingrained in my blood. Hunting distracted me from the reminder that I was being hunted. I *needed* to do this kind of work.

As far as Donnie the demon, I wouldn't have any leads until Ibrahim came to me with information and Mateu got me details. I was free until then. I raised my face to the cloudless sky and closed my eyes. The sun was warm and the breeze was gently blowing.

My feet started making their way toward the marina. I avoided the busy Via Laietana, instead keeping to the inner streets between the buildings. Boutiques were open, and in the lull in business for lunch, I saw shop keepers sneaking a few minutes outside. I waved at a few familiar faces. The El Born neighborhood was a friendly community. Not for the first time, I realized how thankful I was to live there.

I passed by several small shopping centers and continued walking through the narrow streets until I emerged on the other side of El Born. On the main street, traffic flowed with cars full of people leaving work and heading home. I waited for the pedestrian lights to turn green.

I passed the museum and the string of seafood restaurants alongside it. The marina on my right was quiet, with small waves softly splashing against the wall and the boats bobbing up and down in the calm waters. A steady stream of people walked in the same direction I did. I was a good five-minute walk away from the beach. With the museum behind me, I walked along the stretch of sunny asphalt. Cars rushed by me on the main road and a dog and its walker

were headed my way. The dog lowered his head as we closed the distance between us. It was the third dog to exhibit the same behavior.

I sat down on one of the empty benches lining the sidewalk. A nearby tree offered some shade. I made sure to scan the area around me as I took a seat, and saw a tall man drifting to the rail overlooking the marina.

It was the shifter from Miguel's.

Sending up a prayer for the dogs that had alerted me to the shifter's proximity with their submissive behavior, I casually bent down to tie my shoelaces. The shifter still had his back to me. With his superior hearing abilities, he'd be able to pick up when I started moving again. I sat there for some time, considering my options. I only had two: fight or flight. My reflex was always set to fight.

Instead of continuing on straight to the beach, I decided to take a left and cross the main street to enter the neighborhoods. I had a decent knowledge of the area, and I made way for a nearby place that was abandoned. It was a small square surrounded by buildings, but unlike other squares in Barcelona, this one was seldom busy.

The buildings converged. As I increased my pace, I heard the footsteps behind me increase their pace as well. I reached the square and turned around. The shifter was moving leisurely toward me.

"Who are you?" I asked quietly. I knew he'd be able to hear the question.

He ignored me as he moved closer. Noor was right — he was handsome. His piercing eyes, shadowed by strong eyebrows, stared straight at me. He had a swimmer's body that was slim yet powerful, and he wore a loose, long-sleeved, white V-neck shirt with faded denim jeans and black sneakers. His shirt didn't hide the powerful arms. Despite his size, his movements were as graceful as a dancer's. I could tell he would be deadly in a fight.

"Why are you following me?" I asked him.

He waited until he was close to answer my question. "I need some answers."

"About what?" I mentally bet my next paycheck it had to do with the dead shifter.

"You killed a shifter yesterday. Why?"

"What's it to you?" Was this the person that the shifter had instructed me to pass his last message to? I was curious how he knew what I'd done last night. There had been nobody around when I confronted the shifter — I made sure of that — and I doubted that Javier would have told him. "Who are you?"

"I need an answer first," he replied.

"So do I. Who are you?"

"You can call me Enrique."

Despite myself, I felt my eyes widen.

A smug smile appeared on his face. He crossed his arms. I saw the muscles in his arms ripple when he made the movement. "I see you've heard of me."

My throat went dry. Enrique was the name of Diego's Enforcer. He was the one who made sure that all shifters in Barcelona and the outer areas stayed in line. Anyone that drew the wrath of Diego usually had to suffer Enrique's anger first.

Without asking another question, I checked for my magic and threw a demobilizing spell at him. It bounced off. *Crap*. He was using a magic dispeller.

His smug smile widened, and I knew that he must have felt the buzz when my spell dissipated. He took a couple steps toward me. "Is that what happened last night?" Despite the smile on his face, there was a hard look to his eyes. "You attacked him before he had a chance to defend himself?"

"No." I thought quickly about my next move as I reached for the dagger on my belt. The cool metal felt reassuring in my grip.

"Then what happened? And why did you kill him?" Enrique took another step toward me.

"He was an open bounty." I ran a thumb over the hilt of my dagger.

"And you didn't look into it?"

"I cross-checked. He was supposed to be delivered alive, but he fought back." I wondered if the Enforcer was the reason the shifter hadn't wanted to be taken in alive. "Are you the reason he killed himself?"

Enrique didn't respond. I waited for him to take another step forward. I had to get to his dispeller. If I could get it off him, I could use my magic. And the key to that was having him get close to me.

Typically, dispellers were worn as necklaces, bracelets, or rings. I didn't spy any chains around his neck, and he didn't have any earrings or rings on his fingers. He had three colorful woven bracelets on his left wrist. One of them must be it.

I pulled my dagger free from its sheath and tapped it against my thigh. I would have one chance at this. As soon as Enrique realized what I was doing, he would keep me from reaching his hand. Shifters' regenerative powers meant that I needed to strike to kill, otherwise I knew he would heal and then I would be the dead one.

"You want to play? Come, I'll show you how I did it last night," I taunted him.

His eyes narrowed as he observed my fighting stance. With a blur of motion, he moved toward me.

I pivoted and swiped at him. He was fast.

He kicked me in the ribs as I passed, and I flew across the square, landing hard on the ground and knocking the breath out of me. *Fire and brimstone, that hurt.*

I could hear his footsteps getting closer as I tried to breathe. "Come on, get up," he taunted me. "You're fine. All you have to do is tell me who posted the bounty." He could get the same information from the bounty office, but I wasn't going to give up Javier.

I got to my feet and held my ribs, attempting to look more hurt than I was. He came closer, and I punched him in the stomach. He barely moved, but he seemed surprised that I was tougher than the average witch.

I had always hidden my extra abilities from others. I should be less powerful because I was only half-witch, but for some reason I was faster and stronger than full-blooded witches. When I was younger I used to tell myself that my father was a powerful wizard, but my mother quickly dissuaded me from that notion and always told me that my father was a loser, and that was why he wasn't in the picture. I wondered if he even knew he had a daughter. I never asked my mother. Her anger was to be avoided at all times. I couldn't get my answers from her, but I knew that my heightened strength and fighting abilities were the result of something in my bloodline. Without my mother around to explain anything, though, I doubted I would ever figure out what it was.

"How did you find me?" I asked him. I thrust my dagger toward him. He twisted and barely dodged it. We sparred. From his moves, I couldn't help thinking that he seemed to be testing my speed, endurance, and agility.

Sweat dripped down my forehead, and I blinked furiously. I couldn't afford to raise my hand to brush it away. I needed to get to his bracelets.

With his attention focused on the dagger that had almost sliced his side open, I took the opportunity to distract him. I pulled out my second dagger with my left hand and slashed at his hands and cut the bracelets. The magic dispeller fell to the ground as I gathered my magic and whispered a spell.

His body froze in place, his hand reaching for me. His eyes widened; he flexed and realized he couldn't break free. His gaze turned to molten fury. "Let me go," he demanded. His muscles continued to flex as they tried to break free of the invisible bonds.

"Not until you tell me how you found me." I moved toward the bracelets and picked them up. I studied them; they were quality magic dispellers. Whoever had made them was very strong.

He couldn't have known where I lived. I had turned myself invisible every time I was close to my apartment. I knew Noor was

careful about returning home as well, but not knowing how he had found me, it wasn't a risk I was willing to take.

"You'll release me from the spell if I answer your question?" He sounded bored with the whole situation, but I still didn't trust him. His furious eyes gave him away.

Shifters were serious about their word. I knew I had to phrase my request carefully. "Tell me how you located me and found me at Miguel's, and in return I'll let the spell go and you will agree to a truce. No attacking me once I remove the spell. Got it?"

"Temporary truce," he said through gritted teeth. "I can't let this transgression go unpunished."

I almost rolled my eyes. Shifters and their power plays. Despite my better judgement, the temptation was too strong. I was curious to see Diego's Enforcer in action and how my training stood against him. I had gotten the advantage over him because he had underestimated me. He knew better now. "Fine. Challenge in a month's time?"

"Yes," he agreed.

"Okay, answer my question. How did you find me?"

"I tracked you. Your scent was all over him. I can smell it now — cloves and brimstone." He said the last with a snarl. Shifters hated the smell of brimstone.

I looked down at my outfit. Noor must have borrowed my clothes, leaving them smelling of brimstone. I frowned. I had warned her not to do that. I'd have to remind her again. I only wanted my work clothes to confuse shifters. It appeared to have backfired this time.

With a murmured incantation, I released the Enforcer.

He stretched out his arms and fingers, but I could see him struggle against his instinct to attack me. "I'll get in touch with you in a month. I strongly recommend that you don't kill any more shifters until then, Shadow."

My face must have conveyed the shock I felt at him knowing who I was, because he allowed himself a small smirk. My fists clenched by my sides.

He reached his hand out, and I stared at his open palm in confusion. "My bracelets."

I raised my hand and dropped them into his palm. His hand closed over them in a fist, and without another word, he turned and walked away.

I watched him leave, worry gnawing at me. How did he know who I was? What had I gotten myself into? I watched his retreating form grow smaller and smaller.

Aside from my identity now being compromised, I was also wondering if that was the most reckless thing I had ever done. As far as I knew, no one had ever won a fight against the Enforcer, other

than Diego himself. There was no way a half-witch like me could beat a dragon shifter and face no repercussions. I was screwed.

Chapter Six

I slid my daggers back into their sheaths and pulled my phone out of my pocket. I dialed Noor's number, and she picked up on the second ring. "You okay?"

"That was Diego's Enforcer at Miguel's," I told her.

"What?" she asked. I could hear customers on the other end.

"Diego's Enforcer," I repeated.

The noise of customers subsided as Noor moved to a quieter area. She let out a long whistle. "He was hot. I heard Diego was good looking, but if that's the Enforcer, then Diego must be scorching."

"Are you making a dragon joke? Seriously?" Both Diego and his Enforcer were dragon shifters. Diego ruled over the other shifter packs, too, but it was common knowledge that Barcelona belonged to the dragons. Trust Noor to turn it into a guy situation. "Forget the attractiveness scale. Pay attention." I paused before continuing. "He saw us together at Miguel's. You're connected to me."

"So?"

"So you might be a target if they want to mess with me. He might already know that we live together." It was unlikely, given the precautions I took whenever I returned home, but then again, I wouldn't have predicted the Enforcer would track me from yesterday's job, either. “And you have to stop wearing my clothes. He smelled cloves and brimstone.”

Noor laughed. "That hottie knows where I live? Well, he's welcome to come over any time he wants. I could use some warming up." She’d ignored my last comment.

I closed my eyes and counted to five. When I spoke again, it was in a measured tone. "I'm being serious. Be more careful than usual over the next few days, weeks — months, even. Okay?" There was no telling when dragons would strike, but I knew that they could hold a grudge for a long time.

"Alright, alright. I get that you're paranoid, but you do know that if the dragons decide to do anything, we won't be able to stop them, right?"

She was right. When it came down to it, the dragon shifters had the advantage of numbers and strength, but that didn't mean we had to be complacent. Strategy was key to defeating the odds, as I had just proven with that dispeller move against Enrique. I was pretty sure the

Enforcer would purchase a new dispeller made of metal after I'd so easily cut away the threads of the old one.

"We may not be able to stop them, but maybe we can gain the upper hand." It would take some extra work, but that was one definite advantage I had over the dragons: I was more open to risks.

"How?" Noor didn't sound convinced.

"Well, here's the thing..." I told her about my challenge with Enrique in a month's time.

"You're crazy!" she sputtered. "You can't challenge the Enforcer. Do you have a death wish?"

"Technically, I did. And I appreciate your faith in my skills," I said sarcastically.

"I'm not doubting your skills — I just know the scope of *his*. I mean, he can turn into a dragon."

"He can't do magic. I can."

She paused. "Can I come to the match?"

"It's not a match. It's a challenge." I could hear my own teeth grinding in frustration. "You just want to see him again, don't you?"

"Of course. I'd get to admire his nice muscles and everything. It won't be fun seeing you get your ass beaten, but you got yourself into this mess." Noor paused for a few seconds. "You know what? Since you're going to die or be crippled in a month, I'm going to set up a date. We're going to go out and have a fun night. We'll go dancing. You can dance, right?"

"Do I have to?"

"Yes. If you can challenge a dragon, you can dance."

I sighed.

She took my reluctant sigh as permission. "Great, I'll set up something."

"Noor."

"Yes?"

"Be careful. Keep an eye out for anything unusual." I had a feeling I would be seeing the dragon shifter again before the month was up.

"Sure. But until then, you need to lighten up. We have a month until you get yourself killed, and you might as well have fun in the meantime."

A smile came to my lips at how quickly she had come to terms with my eventual death and turned it to her advantage. "You know what happened the last time I dated someone."

"Yes, yes, it didn't end well." That was an understatement. Noor continued, "You can't give up on dating just because of your vampire ex. How about I stay away from vampires?"

"Why do I get the feeling you'll bring a troll along?"

Noor laughed. "It'll be someone that can hold a conversation."

“Fire and brimstone,” I muttered.

“I'll find someone interesting. And you never know, you might even enjoy yourself. It's a stretch, I know, but as a half-angel I do believe in miracles."

"What about your half-demon side?"

"It thinks you need to get some, too. Or I'm going to just get you a cat and be done with it."

"A cat?"

"So you can be the crazy cat lady," Noor said patiently. "If you're going to keep turning down dates and swearing off relationships, then you might as well get a pet."

"I don't like cats."

"Fine, I'll get you a dog.”

"I don't like taking care of creatures." It was true. The thought of being responsible for something's life terrified me.

"I'm not getting you an owl or a toad. You don't want to be *that* witch. Cats are regular familiars, so no one will give it a second thought. Plus, cats take care of themselves. Dogs are more high maintenance."

"Don't get me a pet unless *you* want to take care of it," I warned her. I had a sinking feeling that I was going to show up at the apartment one day and find a bunch of cats waiting for me.

"How about we make a deal? Go out on a double date with me, and I won't get you a pet. What do you think? Short-term commitment versus long-term. What's your choice?"

I let out a loud sigh.

"Double date it is," Noor squealed on the other end. "I can't wait!"

Without another word, the sly half-demon hung up the phone, and I spent the next minute staring at mine and wondering what I had gotten myself into.

Chapter Seven

Before I could fully wrap my mind around how Noor had conned me into going on a blind double date, my phone beeped; I had a new email. I opened my inbox and found that Ibrahim had sent me a file. I wondered for the thousandth time who sent his emails for him.

I opened the attachment and found a list of various business and communication transactions by my target. To track interaction with family and friends, I checked phone records. For activities and possible locations, I went through financial records.

What people don't realize is that we're *all* predictable. No matter how unique and different someone believes they are, the truth is that behavior doesn't change. Everyone falls into a rut of repeated patterns and behaviors. Even when someone is on the run, they tend to fall back on familiar things.

That's what I kept an eye open for as I analyzed the demon's financial records. There were always little things in life that people couldn't give up, no matter the circumstances. Gym. Coffee place. Favorite restaurant.

I checked out the gym my target went to or if he attended movies, and if so, which movie theater he frequented. Some people had hobbies, and they would return to the same stores to purchase what they needed for those hobbies.

It took some time, but I found his weak spot. This demon spent a lot of money on Chinese takeout. It appeared that he ordered it for dinner almost every night.

I called a contact of mine, Hubert.

He picked up on the second ring. "Hey, Aisha. It's been a while. Haven't you had any challenges recently?"

"No, I'm just that good." Most of the time I had enough information from Ibrahim and Mateu that I didn't need to get in touch with Hubert. "I need you to track down a restaurant for me. I have the name and timings of payments, but I need to know the restaurant's address and the specific orders."

"Sure, want me to email you the list when I have it?"

"Yes, it's time-sensitive, so I'd appreciate it if you can get it to me soon."

"It will cost you," he warned.

"It always costs me." Hubert enjoyed acting like his fees were

outrageous, but they were reasonable, considering his skills.

He managed to hack into the restaurant's system and get my requested information within the hour. The demon ordered the same thing every time: shrimp on toast, Kindo beef, and vegetable noodles.

It was time to get to work. I made my way to the Chinese restaurant and waited. I used surveillance equipment to tap into their phone lines. I could have used magic, but I wanted to conserve my energy. Also, sometimes the Alliance had people scouring the streets who were looking for a constant thrum of magic, and I didn't want to get caught up in a sweep.

Everyone glamorized bounty hunting, but no one really thought about the boring bits. A large part of bounty hunting was just waiting around. The job required patience, and I didn't mind it…much. I staked out part of the alley and took a seat to wait it out. I didn't know how long this was going to take. I cast a low-level invisibility spell that wouldn't consume too much of my energy. I was almost invisible, but anyone who *knew* I was there would be able to see me. Thankfully, no one knew I was there. It helped that it was nighttime; the cover of darkness didn't hurt.

Eventually the order came through. It was the same one that the demon ordered all the time. It could be a different person this time, but I had to take the risk and see for myself.

I wrote down the address. It was easy to get to, and not far by car. I discarded my invisibility spell, walked over to where I had parked, and started driving.

It didn't take long to get to the location. I managed to find a parking spot on the same street. I chose to interpret it as a good omen. By my estimate of how long it would take for the restaurant to prepare the order and send out the driver, I knew there was enough time to check out the apartment building.

My plan was easy: intercept the delivery and take it to the target.

It wasn't a complicated plan because I didn't *need* a complicated plan. Complicated plans had more opportunities for something to go wrong. More often than not, the simplest plans were best.

I checked the front door, and thankfully there was no doorman. There was only a buzzer. I looked for my target's apartment number. I could probably get someone to buzz me in if I couldn't pick the lock and enter that way. I sat on the steps and waited. Soon enough, a motorcycle pulled up to the curb and a young man hopped off. He grabbed the order from the back of the motorcycle.

I slowly got to my feet and smiled at the deliveryman. "Hi. I'm glad you got here in time. I'm taking it to my friend's place, apartment 5A. Shrimp on toast, Kindo beef, and vegetable noodles, right? What is it I owe you?"

He rattled off the charge. I had given him enough details for him not to question me, not that he looked to be the inquisitive type. One thing I'd learned during my time as a bounty hunter was that people rarely grew suspicious or were nosy enough to interrupt my work. I handed the cash to the delivery kid and waited until he returned to his motorcycle and drove away. Then I walked up the stoop and pressed the button for apartment 5A.

"Yes?" a male voice answered.

"Your food delivery's here," I said.

He buzzed me in.

Once inside the building, I made my way to the elevator and pressed the button to the fifth floor. It was an old building that was kept in good shape. I listened for sounds of neighbors as I strolled through the hallway on the fifth floor, but if there were people, they were quiet. I knocked twice on the door of apartment 5A. I reached for my magic. The door swung open, and I had only seconds to determine if this was my target.

I shoved the Chinese takeout toward him to keep his hands occupied and I forced my way past him into the apartment.

Disoriented, my target stumbled backwards but still clung to the takeaway bag. "Hey!" the demon exclaimed in surprise.

"Hi, Donnie. I'm afraid I'm going to have to take you in."

Panic crossed his face. "Wait, no!"

Before he could say another word, I murmured a spell and he slumped to the floor. My arm swung out and caught the takeaway bag before it could hit the ground and burst open.

I looked at the bag in my hand and the demon on the ground. I shrugged to myself and made my way over to his dining room table, took out the food, and started eating. I couldn't let good food go to waste. And after all, I had paid for it.

Using the wooden chopsticks provided, I stabbed a shrimp on toast, took a big bite, and chewed. Despite my success in capturing the demon, my thoughts kept turning to my challenge to Enrique in a month. I had to start planning my strategy if I wanted to emerge from that fight alive.

Chapter Eight

Getting Donnie the demon to the drop-off location was easy. I had carried the demon to my car and placed him in the passenger seat. I didn't need a spell to lift his heavy weight.

I unlocked my phone to pull up the coordinates of the drop-off location. The car radio was playing songs from the eighties, and I found myself humming along to the familiar tunes. I glanced at the unconscious demon beside me, proud that I had perfected the knockout spell after a few failed attempts at drugging demons in the past. Normally it was tricky to drug a demon because they had such sharp senses. I had discovered just how tricky it was when I accidentally drugged myself one time. Casting a quick knockout spell, however, alleviated the trouble of listening to bounties plead for mercy and attempt to bribe me with a higher payout. In situations where demons wore magic dispellers, I just used physical force to knock them out.

I arrived at the warehouse drop-off location within fifteen minutes. I parked the car, stepped out, and walked to the other side to unbuckle Donnie. Before I could take the unconscious demon out of the car, three men emerged from the warehouse. I instantly identified them for what they were.

Vampires.

I stepped away from the target's limp form. "The bounty's in the car."

Two of them moved forward, and I raised a hand. They stopped in their tracks.

I shook my head. "Payment first." I put my hand in my pocket, and they tensed. They visibly relaxed when they saw me pull my phone out.

The third vampire studied me. "We could kill you."

I guess he meant it as a threat, but it was more of a statement. Everyone knew that shifters and vampires were capable of easily killing anyone.

"You could try, but that will result in a negative review on your profile," I told them.

Any time someone set up a bounty, a record was created. Using this record, bounty hunters could review client history and decide whether to take a bounty or not. Usually it was Javier who filtered

those records, but I glanced at them from time to time. The records rated information quality, speed of payment, bounty completion status, and other characteristics that would help a bounty hunter make their decision. In return, the client reviewed our service speed and target results. Death of a bounty hunter while on the job always left a negative review for the client, regardless of the circumstances of death. Once a client received a certain number of negative reviews, they were barred from adding bounties. That's why some bounties were only open to hunters of a certain skill level; clients didn't want to risk an unexperienced bounty hunter getting killed on a job that was too difficult for them.

"We'll open a new one," one of the two vampires in front of me said.

"You'll lose your history." I had taken a look at theirs. They had a high rating. It would be a shame to lose it.

The two vampires exchanged glances, then looked back at the one who appeared to be their leader.

The ringleader ran a hand over his face, closing his eyes. Then he opened them and looked straight at me. "We'll buy a new history," he said exasperatedly.

That was an option, too. Some people ran up bounties so that they could build a decent review profile and sold them to people who desperately needed jobs done.

I tensed. Clients refusing to pay for a completed job was easily one of the most irritating aspect of being a bounty hunter. Javier really needed to sort out the payment scheme, because too many times had I been close to killing clients over nonpayment, including now. I should remember to have a chat with him the next time I was in the bounty office.

A fourth voice came from the shadows. "Pay her. Stop playing and get it done."

I narrowed my eyes, but could only see a vague silhouette of the person speaking. How many vampires were there?

The other vampire gave me an apologetic smile, almost as if he was sad he couldn't screw me over. He took out his phone and punched a few numbers in.

Within seconds my phone beeped, and a notification appeared on screen telling me that the payment had been made.

"Nice doing business with you, gentlemen.” I slipped my phone back into my pocket. I stepped aside and pulled open the door for the two vampires.

They dragged the demon out and marched him toward the warehouse. I slammed the car door shut. The two vampires dumped Donnie in front of the third vampire. The leader gave Donnie a look of

disgust, then turned his head to the shadows.

The voice spoke again, this time in an ominously commanding tone. "Finish it."

One of the vampires who had dragged the demon out of the car savagely ripped off Donnie's head, causing blood to splatter everywhere.

I grimaced. Thankfully I was far enough away that none of the blood landed on me. I wasn't squeamish, but there was no need to be inelegant about killing.

"I could've brought him to you dead." I crossed my arms over my chest. I was pretty sure I knew why they hadn't asked for me to kill the demon.

"We would have had to pay you more," their leader said, confirming my suspicion.

"Sure." I shook my head. Vampires. They were so miserly. "Consider me whenever you need another person caught."

I got in my car and drove back to El Born. I didn't wonder what the demon had done. It wasn't my business. My job was to deliver the bounty as agreed. Whatever had upset the vampires must have been big. Everyone knew that it was a death sentence to piss off a vampire.

But I was curious why they had hired me. Vampires usually kept business to themselves and rarely outsourced. Considering how relatively easy it was to find the target, I found the whole thing unusual. That they had an active profile with a long history was troubling. And who was that fourth voice? Was he another vampire? Why didn't he want me to see his face?

I put the whole thing out of my head, since the job was done. After driving back to my apartment, I parked the car a little ways down the street and looked around before I pulled an invisibility spell over myself.

The second I entered the apartment and dropped my invisibility spell, Noor pounced on me. "There you are! I've been waiting for you. We're going out." She started pushing me toward my room. "I've left the outfit you're going to wear on your bed."

"Do we have to go out tonight?" I was not in the mood to make small talk with people I wasn't interested in. All I wanted was a hot shower and my bed.

"Yes, we are. Go get dressed." She ran around the living room, picking up items left and right and finishing off her look.

"I need a shower," I told her. I knew I probably stunk.

"You don't have time."

"I smell like brimstone." I couldn't smell it myself, but I knew that with the prolonged exposure to the demon, especially having carried him, his scent clung to me. Hanging around with Noor all night

wouldn't help, either.

"You don't." Noor rolled her eyes. "Stop making excuses."

"You can't smell it because you're half-demon yourself. The shifters will wrinkle their noses every time I pass by."

"What do you care about shifters? They do it to me all the time. Stop being so sensitive." She paused. "Why do you smell like brimstone?"

"I had a job."

"Bounty, or other?"

"Bounty."

Noor was the only one in my life who knew I moonlighted as an assassin. She had found out by accident when she walked into the wrong room at a party. She'd seen me, a stranger at the time, standing over a dead body, and all she had done was wrinkle her nose and said, "I never liked her." Since then we had become the best of friends, and eventually roommates.

I studied her. "Let me guess, your ex called?"

She stopped. "Yes, he keeps calling me after he cheated on me. Surprise, surprise."

Noor might drone on about my need for a romantic relationship, but she didn't have the best luck when it came to men, either. They were drawn to her, but for some reason they couldn't handle her dual sides.

"Where are we going?" I suppressed a sigh. This night was more for Noor than myself.

Noor perked up. "Miguel's. Come on, go get dressed before it gets too late."

"Shower first," I said.

"Fine, you have five minutes. If you're not out of the shower by then, I'm coming in and dragging you out."

I quickly ran to jump in the shower before she changed her mind.

Chapter Nine

Noor was so excited for the night that she was almost bursting out of her skin. If she had wings, she'd have reached the ceiling. I humored her by nodding along as she kept running through the list of places we would go. She had a crazy idea that we would be club-hopping. It was tiring just hearing about all the different night scenes. I hoped we wouldn't wind up going to any of them.

The dress she had picked out for me was dark green and clung to my curves. The last time I had worn it was when I had infiltrated a society party for a job. The color brought out the green in my eyes. I left my dark hair loose, but twisted a few strands away from my face with a few well-placed bobby pins. I didn't carry my daggers, but they were a simple retrieval spell away if I needed them.

As we approached Miguel's, I realized the place seemed livelier than usual. Groups of supernaturals stood outside, holding their drinks and talking.

"What's going on?" I asked Noor.

"What do you mean?"

I tilted my head toward the crowd spilling out of the restaurant and bar. "It's not the weekend. Seems like there are more people here tonight than usual."

"Maybe Carmen had an event at her store," Noor said. Carmen was a local witch who owned Magic Runes, a store located a short distance away from Miguel's. It was a specialty store for supernaturals and popular with the local covens. She frequently hosted events to drive up business and get the community together.

I made a face. Carmen was nice enough, but I hoped the place wasn't crawling with witches and wizards. Despite my nature, I didn't get along well with other magic users. I preferred other kinds of supernaturals. It probably explained why my best friend was a half-angel and half-demon. I followed Noor inside Miguel's.

"That's our table over there." Noor waved to somebody across the room.

Two men sat at our table. One of them had a wide smirk on his face, and the other smiled politely. Neither of them was her ex-boyfriend.

"You didn't," I hissed at her.

She grinned at me, proud of her deception. "I told you we're going

to have fun tonight."

"We're going to talk about this later." I forced myself to clear the scowl from my face and followed her to the table. Just because I didn't want to socialize didn't mean I had to be a jerk to people. I tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear. I'd have to fix it in place with a bobby pin later.

The two guys stood up. Both of them were my height, which meant we all towered over Noor. The guy that had been smirking widely at Noor reached forward and gave her a hug.

The other man wore a white, button-up shirt with the cuffs rolled up to his elbows. The shirt was just tight enough that I could see the shape of his strong arms. The shirt was unbuttoned at the top, which allowed me a glimpse of the hollow of his neck. He paired the shirt with dark-washed jeans.

His bone structure was delicate, but there was a strong masculinity in his jawline. I noticed his pointed ears; he was one of the fae.

His gaze was intense, and his green eyes were darker than mine. They reminded me of the forest. He stared at me as if memorizing every feature of my face. I felt the heat rush to my cheeks under the scrutiny of his look.

Despite myself, I felt something awaken within me. It seemed like I had a thing for pointy objects. My last boyfriend had pointy teeth, and I carried daggers everywhere I went. I had the irrational desire to kiss his ears. I licked my lips instead. My breath caught as I realized his eyes followed my motion.

"Aisha, this is Leroy. Leroy's a customer of mine," Noor said. "Leroy, this is my best friend, Aisha."

I reluctantly tore my gaze from the stranger and aimed a polite smile at his friend. "It's nice to meet you." I recognized the introduction for what it was: Noor's way of telling me that this was the man she was interested in. Good, the pointy-eared fae was mine to flirt with.

Leroy gave me a nod. He was swarthy with a heavyset build. He reminded me of a pirate. He gestured at his attractive friend. "This is my buddy, Rafael. He nearly didn't show, but I promised him a night with two beautiful women. Aren't you glad you came?" Leroy asked Rafael.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Aisha." Rafael's voice was melodic and low. He surprised me by pronouncing my name the correct way, in Arabic. He reached over the table to shake my hand. His handshake was firm, and he maintained eye contact the whole time. The initial spark of interest grew into a raging inferno. The heat in my cheeks spread to the rest of my body.

"The pleasure's all mine." I could get lost in those eyes. I shot a

sideways look at Noor. Her eyes sparkled. She was never going to let me hear the end of this.

Rafael let go of my hand as soon as I broke eye contact and extended his hand for Noor to shake.

I slipped into the empty seat at the table, and the others followed suit. I was sitting across from Rafael, and Noor was across from Leroy. I unfolded my napkin and placed it on my lap.

Leroy looked around us. "This is the first time I've ever been here. Is it always this busy?"

"No." Noor shook her head.

"We were lucky to find a table then, huh?" Leroy continued. "Lucky for me, they knew Raf."

I saw his friend wince at the nickname.

"Really? Are you a regular? I've never seen you here." Noor's tone registered surprise. "We're here all the time, aren't we, Aisha?"

"We might be showing up at different hours," I said.

"Not a regular, no, but I'm friendly with Miguel." Rafael glanced at the owner standing behind the bar, deep in conversation with a gnome. "What do you do, Aisha?" Rafael asked me.

"No, no, no!" Noor exclaimed. "We are *not* going to talk about work tonight."

"Why not?" Rafael tilted his head.

"Because Aisha is a workaholic, and once she starts talking about work, she's not going to stop. Tonight is all about fun. Acceptable questions are: what do you like to do for fun, where do you want to travel next, what is the most incredible thing that's ever happened to you? Fun, fun, fun!" She slammed her hand on the table to drive her point across.

The three of us laughed at her passion.

"Yes, she's been trying to drag me out of the house for a while now. I don't think you can win this one." I ran a hand through my curls, shaking them free. "How did you two meet?" I asked Leroy. He was clearly infatuated with my roommate.

Noor shook her finger at us. Work.

"At the place that shall not be named." Leroy smirked.

"Piercing or tattoo?" I asked him.

"She helped me choose a tattoo and held my hand while I was getting it because I bawled like a baby." He turned to grab Noor's hand with his left, demonstrating the moment for us. Noor beamed.

"Have you been friends long?" Rafael asked Noor politely.

"We met at a party a few years ago and hit it off gossiping about a mutual acquaintance we both wanted to drop dead." She turned and gave me a crooked smile. She had edited the story, but it was *technically* still the truth.

"How about you? How do you two know each other?" I asked them.

Rafael opened his mouth, but Leroy answered first. "Raf helped me out of a jam a while back. We've been friends ever since."

The fae hid a smile behind his hand. Clearly Leroy was abbreviating their story, too.

Despite my misgivings, I found I was enjoying myself. The rest of dinner went well. The guys were interesting, and shared several funny stories. A lot of them seemed to involve Leroy getting into trouble and Rafael bailing him out. Most of them seemed to involve a club of some kind.

"Vampire clubs are the best. The energy there is always amazing." Noor had the last spoonful of her chocolate dessert and leaned back in her chair. “Mmm, heavenly.”

"That's because they feed off that energy. They make sure to keep it high." Leroy watched her, clearly infatuated. Vampires normally fed on blood, but energy gave them a different kind of buzz.

"Are we going to a vampire club tonight? Let’s go! I want to go dancing." Noor practically bounced in her seat. She turned to me, a question in her eyes. It had been over a year since I had last been to one. I’d kept my distance from vampires after Sebastian.

"Yes, let’s do it." Leroy grabbed her hand, entwining his fingers with hers.

"Yes." Rafael’s gaze burned into me.

There was something about the fae that made me want to feel his body against mine.

So we went dancing.

Chapter Ten

Noor took us to Eixample. The music was loud, and colorful characters flocked through the streets. Most of them were human since the vampires were safely enclosed within the club.

"Are you having fun?" Noor yelled over the music once we were inside.

"Yes," I shouted back.

"You've needed this for so long. You work so much, you forget to have fun and enjoy life." She reached out and engulfed me in a hug. A few glasses had made her tipsy. She always got extra emotional when she drank.

"I know. Thank you. It feels great to be out like this." I gestured at the dance floor.

Noor broke free of me and turned to Rafael. "Aisha doesn't allow herself to have fun. Are you going to show her a good time tonight?"

Leroy smirked. "Yeah Rafael, are you going to show her a good time?"

"If she'll let me." A small smile spread across Rafael's face. It was the sexiest thing I had ever seen. It promised wicked things. His green eyes sparkled as he placed a hand on the small of my back and led me to the dance floor. I allowed myself to go with him, the warmth of his touch spreading to the rest of my body.

We danced freely, allowing our bodies to gyrate in beat with the music. Songs changed, but we kept moving. I found more and more excuses to reach out and touch him. His arm. His shoulder. He grabbed me around the waist and we swayed together. I raised my arms around his neck. He looked down at me, his eyes drinking me in. I reached a hand to his face to feel his sharp jawline. I could feel his rapid heart rate as my fingers grazed his neck. He tilted it to the side, an invitation. I accepted and leaned in to lick the hollow of his throat the way I had wanted to all night.

His grip tightened around me as he brought our bodies closer together. The strength in his hands betrayed his urgency.

"Are we doing this?" I whispered as my lips grazed his ear.

"I'd like to. Is there any reason we shouldn't?" He pulled his head back and gazed into my eyes.

I raised an eyebrow and shook my head. There was no reason at all.

He leaned in and crushed his mouth to mine.

Something inside me awakened as our lips met. He held my face in his hands. I was hungry for more. He pressed his hard body against mine and we moved to the rhythm of the music. My heart was racing. We broke apart to catch our breath. His eyes were dark, and I was sure mine were, too. His fingertips searched my body as he reached for my hips. I clutched his right hand with my left and brought it to my mouth, tracing his fingers with my lips. I kissed his fingertips as my eyes locked onto his. He let out a ragged breath.

"Do you want to get out of here?" I asked him, bringing his hand to my cheek.

"Yes, I would." His eyes burned with passion, and I knew what he wanted. His left hand drifted to the small of my back and kept moving downward. “Unless you want to give people a show?”

I leaned forward, pressing my body against his, and whispered, "Maybe next time."

A slow smile spread across his face, and a mischievous twinkle appeared in his eyes. "Bit of a risk-taker? I'll keep that in mind."

I pulled him off the dance floor. He laughed at my eagerness. When I wanted something, I didn't like to wait. We said goodbye to Noor and Leroy. Noor flashed me a triumphant look and hooted. I grinned back at her.

I don't remember how we made it to my place. By the time we stumbled through the front door, we were both crazed with desire. We barely had time to close the door.

I pulled away, breaking off our kiss and letting go of him. I turned around, facing the door, and looked over my shoulder. "Can you unzip me?"

In a painfully slow fashion, he raised his hand and lowered the zipper of my dress halfway down my back, his knuckles gently brushing against my skin. I inhaled sharply as my skin tingled wherever he touched. I slipped the straps off, and the dress fell to the ground and pooled around my feet. I stepped over it. I reached for his hand. He grasped mine, and I pulled him to my bedroom.

Chapter Eleven

My eyes fluttered open. A soft light came in through the window. It was morning. My body felt sore, but in a good way. Memories of last night drifted into my mind, leaving me feeling satisfied.

I turned my head to survey the man lying next to me. His hand was stretched as if reaching out toward me. Rafael's face was peaceful, and his dark hair was messy. Even asleep, a slight smile touched his lips. I resisted the temptation to lean forward and steal a kiss.

My body tingled as I remembered all the places where Rafael had stolen kisses the night before. Pleasured washed over me. It had been a while since I had felt that good. Everything about the previous night had been incredible. I thought about waking Rafael for a repeat performance of what we had done just hours earlier.

I resisted the temptation and silently slipped out of bed. I padded over to the window and closed the curtain completely, shrouding the room in darkness. I waited until my eyes adjusted to the dimness, then walked to the door. Doing my best to remain quiet, I left the room and softly closed the door behind me.

In the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of orange juice and headed over to the couch. I took a sip, the taste bitter in my mouth.

I sat down and picked up my laptop. Maybe Noor was right. I had an attractive man in my bed, and instead of being with him I was checking for my next job. I clearly had issues.

The website loaded quickly, and I browsed through the listings. Nothing seemed interesting.

A low sound made me raise my head. Noor emerged from the hallway in a t-shirt that fell to mid-thigh, her hair disheveled and eyes bleary. She blinked at me as she took in my pose: I was sitting cross-legged on the couch with my laptop in my lap.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said. She turned back, glancing at my closed bedroom door. "Did he leave?"

"No."

Her eyes widened. "You mean he's still in your bed and you're out here on your laptop?" She was outraged. Noor placed her hands on her hips. "Are you insane? You *are* insane. I'm living with a madwoman, aren't I?"

"Hush, you'll wake him up."

Her arms fell to her sides and she marched over to me. "What is it?

Wasn't he good? Did he want to do weird stuff? Do you need me to get rid of him?" Her exasperated smile turned serious.

"It was good." I allowed myself a satisfied smirk. It had been more than good.

She threw herself on the couch beside me and pulled her knees to her chest, stretching her t-shirt over them. She faced me, eyes sparkling. "Where's my thank you?"

"Thank you, Noor." I resisted rolling my eyes.

"You're welcome." A smug smile appeared on her face.

"What happened with Leroy? Did you leave him in your bed?" I asked her.

She sighed, throwing her head back. "Unfortunately, not all of us are fortunate in love."

"Why? What happened?" When Rafael and I had left them at the club, they were dancing up a storm.

"His ex happened."

"His ex?"

Noor shrugged. "Yeah. She showed up and started causing a scene."

"Why? When did they break up?"

Noor raised her head and stared at me silently.

"No." I shook my head. "He was cheating on her?"

She let out a heavy sigh and threw her head on the back of the couch again. She draped an arm over her eyes. "Why does this always happen to me?"

It was true. I might complain about my ex-boyfriend, but for a hopeful romantic, Noor had the worst luck with guys. She claimed the half-demon side attracted the bad boys to her. Despite her less-than-ideal encounters with the opposite sex, she never allowed her bad experiences to sour her faith. She was ever the optimist.

"She was still his girlfriend?" I had to make sure.

"Yes, at the time." Her lips twisted into a grimace. "Now she's his ex."

"How did you meet him again?"

"He kept coming back to the store and flirting with me. He's been asking me out for some time after he got his tattoo." She couldn't quite hide the note of disappointment in her voice.

"His girlfriend never showed up with him?"

Noor shook her head. "No, and he didn't mention her at the time. I kept turning him down. He's not entirely my type. You saw the way he kept smirking at everything, but after harassing you for not dating, I thought, 'Why not give him a chance?' and I asked him to find a friend for you."

"Thank you?" I felt bad that my date worked out and hers didn't.

"Dating sucks," she said.

"Yeah, it does." Despite what happened last night, my opinion regarding dating hadn't changed.

She lifted her head off the back of the couch. "So, seriously, how was last night?"

"The truth?"

"Yes," she said excitedly.

Before I could answer, I noticed movement in the hallway and saw Rafael standing there.

"Good morning," he said. He walked over to us, smiled at Noor, and bent down to give me a long kiss. My heart was racing by the time he broke it off. I stared at him with all thoughts knocked completely out of my head.

"Thank you for yesterday. I had fun." He gave me a crooked grin. "I'd love to stick around, but unfortunately I have to go to work. I left my card on your bedside table. It has my number. Call me."

“Okay.” I nodded as he turned and left.

Noor turned to me and tilted her head.

Rafael gave me one last smoldering smile before he closed the door behind him.

Noor opened her mouth to speak. I picked up a cushion and smacked her in the face before she could comment on our exchange.

"Ouch." She caught the cushion as it fell from her face. "Fine, I won't say anything, but you just allowed a sexy-as-sin man to leave. Are you going to call him?"

"I'm not sure." I raised my fingers to my lips and traced where his met mine. The little nip at the end of Rafael's kiss reminded me of certain other love bites from the past.

"He's wasted on you." Noor narrowed her eyes at me. "You're thinking of your ex, aren't you?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"This won't go the same way your last relationship did," she assured me.

I hoped not, for Rafael's sake more than my own.

I had killed my ex-boyfriend.

Chapter Twelve

"So you killed your ex-boyfriend. That doesn't mean you should put yourself on a permanent dating ban," Noor said.

I just looked at her.

She raised her hands in frustration. "Why do you insist on punishing yourself? Sebastian was horrible. I still don't know how you stayed with him for an entire year. I would have killed him myself if I didn't think you'd come after me."

My reason for staying with him was simple: he had met me at a weak moment. I was emotionally vulnerable at the time and grateful for the affection and attention. As a result, I turned a blind eye to his shortcomings. By the time I came to my senses, I was too entrenched in the relationship and thought it was best to stay with him because it was comfortable. I didn't want to start over with someone new. It happened more than women cared to admit.

“I’m in my thirties. You think I’d be better at this by now.”

Noor shrugged. “Relationships are weird. Sebastian was obnoxious, but you were too deep in the relationship to see how patronizing he was. He was the first guy in a while to accept that you were stronger than he was. It made you blind to his flaws.”

“I guess,” I conceded. It still chafed at me how I had allowed myself to be in that relationship for so long. I had killed him for the good of the world, more than for myself. Or that’s how I reassured myself, anyway. “I don’t think he believed I was strong enough to kill him.”

“But you did and it’s the best thing you’ve done. I’m loving you sharing your vulnerable side but, alas, work calls and I need to take a shower.” Noor winked at me. “We can have another session when I’m back.”

I threw a cushion at her. She ducked away, got off the couch and disappeared into her room.

The smile stayed on my face, as I returned my attention to my laptop, skimming the job listings for one that would be a challenge. There were a couple of CEOs and requests that they be found dead of heart attacks. I scrolled past them.

The average person wouldn't think that assassinations would be in very high demand, but they'd be wrong. There were always angry people in the world. And vengeance was a powerful emotion.

My path to becoming an assassin was a twisted one. My mother had introduced me to this world when I was young. She'd taught me how to continuously find the website as it jumped from server to server on the dark web, constantly evading the authorities. The website was simply another training exercise for me. It was a tool she used to locate targets for me to kill. She always selected demons because she had a focused hatred for them. Looking back, I realized she had an irrational enmity toward the creatures. Unfortunately, the effects of her hatred had trickled down to me.

Her hatred of demons helped me identify demons in whatever guise they wore. It made me excel at hunting them down. I never knew how they had offended her. Her driving force was her burning desire to annihilate as many demons as possible.

After she disappeared, the website became an easy way for me to earn money. The people sending me payments had no idea how old I was. They had no idea that the assassin who took the job was a teenager at the time. The website helped me survive.

As time went on, I established my own rules about choosing a target. My targets were no longer exclusively demons — any supernatural was fair game. The first rule was that the target couldn't be underage or too young. We all made stupid mistakes when we were teenagers, and young people were usually the targets of other young people, who created the bounty on impulse and would later regret their decision. I couldn't remove the listing from the website, but I would never accept the job.

My second rule was that the target had to have some sort of criminal record. I needed to know that I was doing some good in the world. The road to hell is paved with good deeds. I had no illusions about what I did, but I needed to know it was justified in some manner.

The research helped me easily filter jobs that I wanted. One time I had seen a "humanitarian" on the website, and after doing my own research, I learned that he had a hidden appetite for children. I took on the job pro bono.

I kept scrolling. On the fourth page, I found something unusual: a listing for a vampire hit.

Noor stepped into the hall holding a towel. Her hair was wet. She raised the towel to her head and rubbed it dry. "Found anything?"

"There's a vampire on here." I clicked on the listing.

"Vampire? That's strange, isn't it?" She made her way over to me.

"Yes, it is." It was more than strange. Vampires didn't normally outsource. I hadn't given my last job a second thought, given the events of the previous night, but I now realized it was strange indeed for those vampires to be at the drop-off location. What was going on?

"Who is he?" Noor peered at the monitor.

A photograph of a blond vampire with dark eyes flicked onto the screen. It named him as Sloan Nicholi. I scrolled past his photo to see how much the job paid. I switched to a different window and logged into a criminal database Hubert had given me access to. "It says here that he's got a criminal record dating back to the 1920s."

A whistle escaped Noor's lips as she read some of the charges. "Wow, not a great guy, is he?"

"Why do you think he's on here?" I studied the listing. "It has six hours until it expires. Think it's a setup?"

She shook her head. "I think people get mad at vampires the same as everyone else. This guy just probably didn't think of the fallout if someone actually found out that they were the one that placed the hit. Or it's another vampire that doesn't want it traced back to them. You know what their politics are like. It could be somebody from their own bloodline."

“So, should I take the job?”

“Do your research. If it’s legit, then yes, take it. It pays well.” She continued to dry her hair.

I stared at the vampire and committed his features to memory. With thoughts of Sebastian in the forefront of my mind, I knew what my answer would be. I would take the job. It was time to go vampire hunting.

Chapter Thirteen

Tracking vampires was tricky, and there were two types of vampires: they either went underground and disappeared for years, or they were everywhere and taunted you.

I wondered which kind this vampire, Sloan Nicholi, would be.

After Noor left for work, I finished having breakfast and walked across the street to the Barcelona Cathedral. The tourists moved like ants as they took their photos, mingled at the many cafes, and sat on and around the stone blocks lined up in front of the cathedral. A lone guitarist played for the crowd, and a few children strolled over to his guitar case, dropping in spare change. It wasn't the busiest time of day yet, but it was still noisy.

I made my way around the cathedral until I stood under the bridge, looking up at Mateu.

Within moments he had a partial invisibility spell wrapped around himself and he scrambled down near me. A partial invisibility spell meant humans couldn't see him, but supernaturals could. He winked at me.

I leaned against the wall. "You can stop asking around about that demon."

"Found him, have you?" Mateu almost looked impressed. "That was fast. I hadn't turned up anything useful, but okay. Let me guess, you're interested in getting information on somebody else?"

I nodded.

"Who is it this time?"

I opened my mouth and ran my tongue over my incisors. I didn't want to say vampire out loud with the other gargoyles so close. Their ears would be listening. I couldn't afford to have the other vampires catch wind of what I was doing and then descend on me like a plague of locusts.

Mateu went silent for a couple minutes. I spent the time listening to the guitar player around the corner. He was so good that the crowd of tourists spilled out to where we were standing. Mateu finally spoke. "I heard there's a new lounge in Eixample. Have you heard of it? It opened a few weeks ago. You'll need an escort to get in."

An exclusive vampire club. That sounded promising. Most vampires had a deep desire to peacock whenever they had the opportunity. It had to do with their competitive hierarchy. I was

working blind on this job, so I would take what I could get. "You think I'll make new friends there?"

Mateu knew vampires as well as I did, if not better. "I would guess so, but be careful. I don't have a good feeling about this."

"Do you want to hear about who I met recently?" I asked him. He'd love this gossip. "You'll never guess."

"Is it the man you were seen with last night?" Mateu asked slyly.

I gaped at him. "How do you know about that?"

The gargoyle cackled at my expression. "Was there a man? I just made that up."

My face flushed at how easily I had given myself away. I remembered how Rafael and I had stumbled to my apartment. In our haste, I hadn't taken the usual precautions to ensure that I wasn't being followed.

I changed the subject. "No, this was a new person that I never expected to meet."

The gargoyle's eyes lit up in anticipation. "Who was it?"

"Shall I give you three guesses?"

Mateu grinned. He loved games. "Describe this person in three words."

I thought about it. "Hmm…tall."

Mateu rolled his eyes.

"Scary."

The gargoyle looked surprised. He hadn't expected me to use that word. His expression turned thoughtful.

I continued. "Works for someone scarier."

"The Enforcer," Mateu guessed instantly.

I laughed. "That was good. I hadn't expected you to get it so quickly. Was it the scary part?"

"Yes." Mateu smirked. "You can't get things past me. How did you meet him?"

"Long story. Short version is we're meeting again."

Mateu opened his mouth, then snapped it shut with a click. I could almost see the wheels turning as he thought over my answer. "Do you want to meet him again?"

I shrugged. "I think it would be interesting to see what happens."

"Can I be there when that takes place?" The gargoyle almost hopped. I'd never seen him so excited. He wanted to be there front and center for any showdown that would occur between me and the Enforcer. All the gargoyles would die of envy if they found out that Mateu had access to gossip on Diego's man. Mateu would have talk for ages.

"Depends. Who are you cheering for?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You'll find out when I'm there." Mateu cackled. His laughter was

infectious.

"No, I'm not accepting that as an answer."

He refused to tell me who he'd support, and the gargoyle was still guffawing as I walked away.

I wandered over to watch the musician and thought about my next move. It was time for me to set up my ticket to the vampire lounge. I had an acquaintance who acted as a low-level informant from time to time, but I couldn't ask him to accompany me. It would expose our working relationship to all the other vampires, and I'd lose an asset.

The only other option was to ask Ibrahim. I walked through the winding paths along the cathedral and emerged onto Via Laietana. I stroked my dagger absentmindedly. There was a chance I could find Ibrahim at Miguel's. I'd make my way there before I tried his home, since the restaurant was closer.

Despite rumors to the contrary, vampires could indeed handle the sun. The older the vampire, the stronger their ability to remain out in the sun for extended periods of time. New vampires were drained faster and therefore preferred a shaded spot under a tree on a sunny day.

And this sunny day appeared to also be my lucky day. I had saved myself a long walk. As I approached the restaurant, I saw Ibrahim at his usual table in the corner. It overlooked the street. Ibrahim always said that the years may pass but people never changed, and he enjoyed watching them stroll by him.

"Good morning," I greeted him, slipping into an empty seat. The morning crowd was sparse at Miguel's. The busiest times were lunch and dinner. There were still a few people seated, but they didn't appear to be shifters, so I knew I could rely on a modicum of privacy with the vampire.

"Good morning, Aisha." Ibrahim’s gray eyes studied me. His high cheekbones gave him a regal look. The dark-purple shirt he wore offset his fine brown locks perfectly. Not for the first time I wondered who he had been before he was turned.

"I need a favor." There was no need to engage in small talk.

I could swear I saw his lips twitch just a fraction. "When haven't you needed a favor?" Ibrahim folded his arms across his chest.

"Isn't that the beauty of our relationship?" I gave him what I hoped was a winning smile.

"Not when I call in all the favors you owe me. That day will come." Ibrahim always threatened to call in all the favors. Knowing the vampire, I was sure he’d kept track of everything I had ever asked of him.

"I pay you for most of our transactions," I reminded him.

"They're still favors." He leaned back. "What do you need? I may

entertain you."

"Do you know an exclusive new vampire lounge that just opened a few weeks ago?"

"Yes, the Immortal Blood. I was invited to the soft opening."

Of course he had been invited. I resisted rolling my eyes. "I need to go there tonight, and I heard I need an escort."

"Who's your target?" Ibrahim asked. "Are you going to make a scene with one of my people?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I just want to have fun, and Mateu told me it's a cool lounge." I narrowed my eyes and dared him to contradict me.

He raised an eyebrow and said drily, "Yes, you're the epitome of fun."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" I frowned.

"Nothing. You always amuse me."

My frown deepened.

"If you were all about the fun, then why don't you take your roommate?" Ibrahim unfolded his arms and began tapping his fingers on the tabletop.

"Because she's not a vampire."

"We'll bring her with us. If you invite her, I'll go with you myself." He mirrored my narrowed eyes and dared me to call his bluff.

"Fine, fine." I glared at him. "I have a job. Are you happy? I need to find a guy, and time's money."

"I'm not interested in the scene, but I will have someone join you. Do you have any preferences?"

"Female."

Ibrahim nodded. "Consider it done. She'll meet you outside Immortal Blood at the stroke of midnight. Will that do?"

"That would be perfect." I had found my ticket in. What was one more favor owed to the vampire?

He smiled back at me, flashing his sharp fangs.

Chapter Fourteen

After a successful job like last night's, I always rewarded myself with gold jewelry. There was only one place to do that: Karam Jewelry.

After leaving Miguel's, I made my way to the small storefront. It was a cool day and the air was crisp and fresh. The sun was bright, but clouds covered it, causing the temperature to be colder. I put my hands in my pockets and walked down the winding streets.

A large sign outside the store said Karam Jewelry. I peered at the window display. There were some gorgeous pieces. Dina, the store owner, was a true artist. She had a magic touch with metals and created innovative designs. One of the pieces on display was a beautiful ruby ring. If I had been the type to wear rings I would have purchased it, but rings in my line of work could be an issue. I limited myself to necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. Sometimes I couldn't help myself, though, and bought something purely because it was so beautiful, but I felt bad that it wouldn't be seen. I tried to resist those impulse purchases.

I walked into the store. It was a spacious place with a high ceiling. The large windows allowed sunlight to stream in and illuminate her designs. I looked above at the loft, where Dina had her workroom. The height of the loft allowed her to work and simultaneously be able to see when customers walked in. Sometimes she liked to give customers their time to browse before she went downstairs to ask if they needed help with anything.

"Hello up there. People are here wanting to spend their hard-earned money," I called up to her. I could see her head bent over her worktable.

She raised her head and leaned over the railing. "Hey, Aisha. Give me a minute and I'll be right down."

"Take your time." I ambled between her displays and peered at the collections. I was familiar with most of them, but I liked to look nonetheless. I hovered over a collection of golden braids. Dina had managed to weave gemstones in between the strands that made the pieces stand out.

Dina descended the spiral staircase. She wore gloves and held a jewelry tray in one hand. She placed the tray on the counter near the cash register and came over to where I stood. "How are you?"

"Good thanks, and you?"

"Can't complain. Did you see anything you like, or are you interested in creating a custom piece?"

I pointed at the braided bracelet in the display case. "I love this."

Dina beamed. "That's one of my new designs. I was experimenting. I was inspired by a rainbow and thought about the leprechauns hunting for their pot of gold. I thought I'd incorporate all the colors."

I looked at the piece again and noticed that the different gemstones did appear to match the colors of the rainbow. I had totally missed it, having focused on the intricacies of the goldwork.

"Do you want to try it on, or should I just wrap it up for you?" Her eyes sparkled. She knew the answer, but always asked me anyways. "Try it on," she insisted.

In most cases, once I tried one of Dina's designs I didn't take it off. She would just give me the box, certificate, and receipt, and I'd store them at home until I decided to change my jewelry.

She unlocked the case with a touch of her fingers. The cases were magically locked and therefore had no need for keys. Dina never had to watch her customers for suspicious behavior because she knew they wouldn't be able to steal anything, anyways.

She removed the bracelet from the case. I turned up my wrist, and she placed the bracelet around it and closed the clasp. I raised my hand until the bracelet settled. I looked down at it as I moved my wrist from side to side. The gemstones sparkled, and the gold glimmered in the sunlight. It was a stunning creation.

"I love it," I repeated.

Dina made her way over to the counter. She rang me up and I paid for my new bracelet. Dina pushed the box, receipt, and certificate toward me, but I gently pushed them back. "Can you keep these with you?" I asked. "I'll pick them up on the way home. I need to go somewhere after this."

"Sure."

"Who are these for?" I nodded at the tray she had brought down from her workroom. They were polished charmstones. Several glowed red with streaks of orange within. They looked like small fires. At a glance it appeared there were over a dozen of them.

"The dragons have a new intake. I'm just checking the inventory."

That made sense. Charmstones were rare and highly regulated. Of course it would be the dragons who could afford the expensive gems in bulk.

"What's the latest secret project?" I teased her.

Dina allowed herself a small smile. "I'm working on a new collection. The last one was the 'Pot of Gold' project, which is the one you got your bracelet from. This time I'm working with silver on a range of rings. I'm using the mermaids and selkies as my inspiration

for them."

"Why silver?" I tilted my head. I knew that Dina favored gold as her material of choice to work with.

"It will be mixed with blue and green gems to reflect water."

"If you manage to catch that beautiful shimmer of the light hitting the water in the morning, I would buy that piece from you in a heartbeat."

"And store it in your vault at home?" Dina asked. She knew I preferred to wear gold, and what happened to her stunning art.

"I'd try to wear this one, but it might be too distracting," I said with a rueful grin. "That's the problem with your work — it's so pretty that all I want to do is stare at it."

"That's a wonderful compliment. Thank you." Dina beamed. "How's work going for you?"

I shrugged. "Same old." I could tell her that I was being hunted, that I had a fight with the Enforcer in a few weeks, or that I was chasing after a vampire, but there was no need to share all that with her. I raised my wrist. "Today's going to be a better day because of this. Thank you."

"Thanks for passing by. Remind me to show you a piece from the new collection when you come back for your bag."

"I will," I promised her.

Chapter Fifteen

I headed to the bounty office. I needed to know if Javier knew about the vampires. If he didn't, then he needed to be given a head's up. Poor Donnie.

"Hello," I greeted Sandra.

"Aren't I lucky, seeing you so often these days?" She beamed at me, ever cheerful.

"Do you ever go home?" I asked the nymph.

"Why would I need to when I work with such delightful people like you?" Her dimples deepened as she smiled widely.

I grinned at her. "No need for the sarcasm."

She laughed. "You know you're not just Javier's favorite. You're one of mine, too."

"Who's my competition so I can eliminate them?" I put on a fierce face and took out one of my daggers, waving it theatrically in the air.

Sandra giggled. "Can't you guess?"

"Luke and Tahani?"

"You'll never know." She smirked. "I won't have you tell the other bounty hunters I have favorites and have them squabbling for my affection. Go do that with Javier."

"He's in there?" I sheathed my dagger behind me.

"Where else would he be?" She gave me a mischievous look. She knew the mystery of their seemingly constant work hours was killing me. If I ever got bored enough, I might just spend an entire day at the office to see if they ever left.

Fair enough. I waved at her, went down the hallway, and quickly reached Javier's office.

"I don't get jobs as quickly as you complete them, Aisha," Javier said when he saw me enter. He pulled at his beard.

"I didn't come here for a job. I came here to tell you about that last one."

"Decided to take a vacation at last? That will give me time to drum up more work for you." The dwarf continued to stroke his beard as he thoughtfully watched me. In all the time he'd known me, I had never taken an extended leave. I wasn't about to start now. He didn't need to know that I was working on something. Javier leaned back in his chair. "What do you need to tell me about that last job?"

"I delivered the demon to the location, as agreed. The clients were

there waiting for me."

"They caused you trouble?"

"They killed the demon in front of me."

Javier frowned. "They could have asked for him to be delivered that way."

"That's what I told them. They said they didn't want to pay more."

Javier narrowed his eyes. He hated to be cheated out of a bigger payday. He began to curse, but I raised my hand, cutting him off. "They were vampires."

Javier's jaw snapped shut. His face darkened. "You're sure?"

I nodded.

He turned to his computer and pounded the keyboard. He scrolled until he found what he was looking for. I waited as he read silently to himself. He turned toward me. "They didn't identify themselves as vampires on their profile."

"There were three of them. There might have been a fourth, but I never got a look at him, so I can't be sure he was a vampire. They took orders from him, so I assumed he was."

"I'm flagging their account, and I'll look into it. Thanks for letting me know."

"No problem." I shrugged. "You might want to add on there that they made a threat."

"What?" Nothing pissed off Javier more than clients threatening his bounty hunters.

"I managed to talk them out of it. Told them it would hit their rating if they did away with me. Someone else may not have managed to walk away, though." I had to admit the fourth client's role in tampering down the tensions. Had he told them to go ahead with killing me, I had no illusions about how things would have turned out.

Javier hissed under his breath.

I gave him a wry smile. "Sorry for ruining your morning."

"It's on them." He waved dismissively. "I'll get them sorted out."

"Find some interesting new jobs for me. I need a challenge," I called over my shoulder as left his office.

"Take a long vacation," he yelled after me as I made my way back to the front lobby.

I was still chuckling as I passed Sandra. I said goodbye and returned to Dina's store. I picked up my bag and headed toward Passeig del Born, a small inlet behind the Santa Maria del Mar Cathedral. I stopped and watched a bride and groom step out of the church as their family and friends clapped and congratulated them. Customers sitting in cafes across the street clapped for them also. People always enjoyed seeing love and the thought of new beginnings. I continued walking and saw a few teenagers sitting on a stone wall,

kicking their heels against it. A couple of skateboards lay in front of them. Elderly folks sat chatting on the benches nearby. I smiled at their shared contentment despite their contrast in age.

I passed the street leading to my home and continued straight to the supermarket, which was conveniently located next to my apartment. It was small, but it had everything we needed. For other stuff I usually visited the other markets. I loved markets.

I picked up a basket and browsed the aisles. We were running low on orange juice, so I picked up a bottle. I hovered over the fresh produce section. I thought about what I wanted to make for dinner and idly wondered if Rafael would be returning to my place any time soon. I flirted with the idea of inviting him over for dinner. A small smile hovered on my lips. I hadn't looked at the card he'd left on my table. I could call him later and ask if he'd like to come over. We didn't have to have dinner. As I continued down the aisles, I picked up items that would be easy to prepare after vigorous activity. I wouldn't mind having Rafael back for seconds.

I paid for my items and headed home.

I put the groceries away in the kitchen and padded over to my room, but hovered by the door. I could see Rafael's card on my bedside table. I bit my lip. Would I be able to resist calling him once I saw his number?

I shook my head, clearing all thoughts. I had a job to do. Once I completed it, Rafael could be my reward instead of a piece from Dina's. I wasn't going to look at his card until the job was complete.

I stepped back and went back to the living room. I had just enough time to nap on the couch before I had to go hunt vampires.

Chapter Sixteen

At precisely the stroke of midnight I was standing outside the Immortal Blood vampire lounge. Cursing myself for forgetting to ask Ibrahim what his vampire contact looked like, I hoped he had at least given her a description of me. I wondered how long I'd have to wait.

I had spent my time earlier researching Sloan Nicholi, and, from Hubert, I had discovered he owned shares in several vampire lounges.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder and I spun around. I hated people sneaking up on me, and it was rare that people could do it. Vampires excelled at it. I scowled.

"Hello." The vampire in front of me was stunning. She had waist-length hair the color of honey. Her eyes were a deep chocolate brown. Her beauty melted away my frown. "I'm Helen," she said.

"I'm Aisha, but you already knew that. I love your eyeliner." Her eyeliner was winged; it was something I could never perfect.

She smiled, revealing blindingly white teeth. "After all these years, I managed to finally get it right."

I grinned at her. I guess that's one advantage to immortality: you have all the time in the world to ensure your makeup skills are flawless.

"Come on, let's get you in." She waved at the bouncer, and he lifted the red velvet rope that barred unwanted guests from entering. He didn't ask a single question, even though I was clearly not a vampire.

The lounge had an industrial-looking interior. It was all exposed concrete and dark colors, but with modern decor. The lighting was dim, but my eyes quickly adjusted.

Vampires sat at circular tables with glasses of blood in front of them. I recognized a few familiar faces. Some of them glanced at the door to see who had stepped in, and I felt a sharp sense of satisfaction as all of them looked away first. Most of them were friends of Sebastian, my ex-boyfriend, and I hadn't seen them since I'd killed him.

The waitresses were vampires, too. They wore slinky outfits that shimmered as they walked around the place. My eyes automatically searched for exits. The windows were blacked out, and other than the door we'd come through I couldn't see another, but I knew there had to be a back exit.

In the far corner, a DJ's face was illuminated by the glow of the

laptop in front of him. He surveyed the crowd, paying attention to how many people were enjoying the music, and looked back down at his laptop.

Helen leaned close to my face. "How do you want to play this?"

"I'd like to just keep an eye out for the vampire I'm trying to find. Maybe you can do the same?"

"Sure, who is it?"

“Sloan Nicholi,” I told her.

Her eyebrows knit together. "Are you sure you want to find him?"

"Yes, why? Do you know him?"

She shook her head. "No, but I've heard of him. He runs with a bad crew. I wouldn't go looking for him if I were you."

"What makes them so bad?" Here was an opportunity to understand vampires better. Vampires in general had a lax ethics system. Saying that someone was "bad" didn't clarify anything, but who was I to talk? I'm sure many would say my ethics were negligent, too.

Helen looked troubled. "I can't really discuss it."

Interesting. Her hesitation implied that there were vampire secrets behind the assassination request, that this was bigger than I'd previously thought. I wondered how big of a hornets’ nest I was stirring. I'd have to be extra careful with this job.

I changed the subject. "Don't worry about it. I'm going to get a drink. What do you want?"

"A-positive," she replied.

I gave her a nod and left her. I was almost certain she wouldn't ask about the target after that conversation. This was good — I was on my own.

Mateu had been right about the Immortal Blood. It was the place to see and be seen. All around me vampires wore the latest fashions and glittered with gaudy jewels. I reached up to my hair and made sure the bobby pins kept my hair in place. I felt underdressed in my sleeveless black dress and ballet flats. I glanced down at my beautiful new bracelet and felt better.

One truth about vampires: they’re all gorgeous. No matter how unattractive they’d been as humans, they became stunning once turned. Numerous supernatural scientists had tried to study the phenomena but always turned up empty.

Sebastian’s beauty was part of what had drawn me to him. He’d taken my breath away daily. No matter what he did that annoyed me, one look at his face and all thought of his transgressions would disappear. That's how I learned that beauty was power. And it was a strength that the vampires wielded very well. Sebastian was a master at manipulating people into doing what he wanted. Some believed

vampires could gain power over you by catching your eyesight, but I knew the truth. No, vampires caught you when you looked upon their faces and started worshipping them for their beauty.

Being around all that exquisiteness again gave me a rush. It was like seeing works of art in motion. I knew I needed a drink, but I didn't know if it was to clear my head or to dull the emotions that had come rushing back.

I waited at the bar as the bartender talked to a couple a few seats down from me. The woman was facing me, and I had a view of her impeccable bone structure. She had wavy brown hair and a petite but curvy frame. She reminded me of a miniature Jessica Rabbit. The man she was with towered over her. He had his back to me, so I couldn't see his face. He was about my height, with dark hair and a lean build. He placed his hand on her arm, and she shrugged it off with a pout.

The bartender approached me. "One A-positive and one rum and Coke," I told her.

While I waited for my drinks, I watched the beautiful woman sip hers as the man seemed to placate her. The blood in the glass was dark and stained her lips. Although I couldn't see his face, I wondered how handsome her companion was. I was sure they made a striking couple. Vampire couples were dazzling. The effect of two of them together always left me awestruck.

As if sensing my gaze, the man turned around.

I was half-right. He was stunning, but he wasn't a vampire.

It was Rafael.

Chapter Seventeen

Rafael's first reaction was shock, but his face quickly adopted a "this isn't what it looks like" expression. He opened his mouth, but the bartender returned at that moment with my drinks.

"Thank you," I told her, reaching for the glasses. I turned to walk away and noticed that Rafael's gaze was hitched on the two drinks in my hands. He looked back up to me and opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment the vampire he was with placed a hand on his shoulder, and he turned around.

I used the distraction as my opportunity to escape and return to Helen.

She thanked me as she took her glass. We moved to a small empty table and sat down. I took a sip. "How's your drink?"

"It's good." The vampire downed half her glass of A-positive. She smiled at me, and I saw the blood had stained her teeth. I made a gesture with my finger, and she ran her tongue over her teeth, licking them clean.

"This is a nice place." I forced myself to make small talk as I tried to tamp down the emotions threatening to bubble to the surface. I was angry, confused, and a bit miserable. The combination was from seeing my ex's friends and my recent lover at the same place at the same time. It bothered me more than I would have expected to see Rafael with that gorgeous woman. I kept repeating in my head that we'd had one night of fun and that was it. We weren't even dating. Unfortunately, my traitorous mind couldn't stop thinking of how his body felt pressed against mine. I could feel a flush crossing my face.

"We're giving this an hour and then we're leaving," I told Helen.

"So soon?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I don't think he'll show up late." All the important and most impressive vampires appeared to be here. Ibrahim had chosen the time he knew the place would be most active. My target would only show up if he wanted to be seen.

"Okay." Helen took another sip of her drink. "Do you want to meet some people?"

"No, thank you." I wasn't looking for distractions.

She didn't seem upset that I was being antisocial. She continued to sit with me and kept a running commentary even when I didn't respond. As hard as I tried, I couldn't seem to keep my gaze from

traveling to Rafael and the stunning woman he was with. I took a small measure of pride in that he never managed to catch me looking at him. My emotions were careening all over the place.

Helen distracted me from my musings. "It's been an hour."

"Let's head out." I got to my feet. It had been a long sixty minutes.

As we made our way to the door, she shared, "I asked if he would show up. His friends said no."

I stopped in my tracks. "You did what?"

"I didn't want you to waste your time or miss him."

“When did you do that?”

“When I got the last round of drinks. I didn’t say anything in case they were wrong.”

I shook my head. I should have let her know not to ask people about him. It was my mistake for not clarifying that to her. "Please don't ask other people about where he is. I'd prefer if he didn't know that I'm looking for him."

Helen shrugged. "Alright, I won't." She sighed and looked back into the club. I knew she wanted to go back inside, but she was too polite to simply abandon me. "It was nice to meet you. Thanks for the drink.”

"Thank you for the company," I replied.

Helen walked away. I reached my left hand behind my back for the familiar feel of my dagger. I pulled it out and tapped it against my thigh as I walked back to my car.

Something shoved me forward, and I stumbled to the ground. My right hand moved to break my fall, and I winced as I felt something in my wrist twist painfully. I got to my feet as quickly as possible and turned around to face down the person who had shoved me.

"You have some nerve showing your face here after what you did to Sebastian." It was Ethan, Sebastian's friend. I had never been fond of my ex's friends, but Ethan was my least favorite of them all. He was an entitled braggart that believed vampires should rule over humans.

I reached for my magic. I considered using a healing spell to reduce the pain in my wrist and decided against it. It felt good to feel pain. I needed more of it. "What did I do?"

I was spoiling for a fight. I wanted to hear him say it.

He snarled. "You destroyed him. You took his life away. We never approved of him dating you. He could have done much better than a half-witch. He deserved better."

"*He* deserved better?" I couldn't help but laugh out loud. "He lied to me and cheated." I heard the hurt in my voice, despite believing that I had come to terms with the asshole's death. Our intimate relationship, no matter how awful, had left its mark on me. I hated feeling this way. I needed to distract myself with physical pain. “He was

arrogant.” I moved my wrist in a circle, relishing the pinpricks of pain.

“He had a right to be.”

I rolled my eyes at Ethan’s devotion to his false friend. “He was underhanded and pompous. He wasn’t loyal to his friends.” I wouldn’t repeat what Sebastian had called Ethan behind his back. I didn’t believe in breaking confidences, even after a fallout or death.

“He was loyal to me.” Ethan rushed at me. To humans he would have appeared as a blur hurtling toward me, but I wasn't a human. I was a half-witch, true, but I was blessed with speed and strength also.

I ducked out of the way and spun my blade, slashing at him as he passed. He pivoted, jumping beyond my reach. That didn't deter me. I quickly closed the short distance between us and aimed the dagger at his heart.

He caught my hand with his, and I winced. His grip was strong, and the pressure was only increasing. I blinked back tears as I kicked at him with my right leg. Thankfully I caught his kneecap, and he loosened his grip on me. Coughing, I jumped away. He bared his fangs at me and let out an unearthly sound. I narrowed my eyes.

I wanted to injure him, not kill him. He had crushed my hurt wrist harder than I’d expected. The pain made me feel alive.

We ran at each other. I slashed the air with my dagger, my aim missing him as he danced away from the sharp blade. I finally made contact with his upper-right arm and he hissed, his fangs now extended. He ran at me again and headbutted me. Stunned, I fell backwards. My head rang. I blinked, but before I could recover, Ethan had punched my face. My head bounced against the wall.

Ethan had no compunctions about hitting a female, that was clear. He punched me twice more before grabbing my hair and hissing in my ear, "Know that I could have ended you right here, right now, but I chose not to because he wouldn't have approved."

He had no idea I was holding back. The pain felt good to me. I opened my mouth and he waited for my answer. “You’re a coward, just like he was,” I hissed.

He raised his hand and slapped me. I let myself crumple to the ground. Still I resisted the lure of healing spells, embracing the agony. I knew the limits of pain my body could take. My mother had made sure of that. This was nothing.

My vision went dark. I heard him wipe his face, and with a sneer in his voice, he said, "I better not see you around here again, or you'll get worse than this."

I lay against the wall, limp as a rag, as the vampire walked away.

Chapter Eighteen

My face began to throb as I slipped in and out of a hazy consciousness. Everything hurt, but not enough. I needed more.

The voice in my head chastised me for not using the full arsenal of weapons at my disposal. I had kept to my dagger only and avoided the use of magic. I hadn't even used my basic training. I argued with the voice. I wanted to get beaten. I was hurting inside and wanted the outside to match. Why didn't it know that?

A sound made my head snap up, and I winced at the jarring pain that followed the sudden movement.

Someone stepped out of the shadows. My fingers tightened around the hilt of my dagger. He was a tall man, and powerfully built. He took a few more steps forward and I saw that he had strong features and dark hair. A strand of hair fell across his forehead which reminded me of Clark Kent's famous coiffure. His narrowed eyes were golden caramel.

He raised his face as if sniffing the air. A shifter. It was always this little mannerism that gave them away. I wondered idly if they were even aware of it.

I had thought the vampires inside the Immortal Blood were beautiful creatures, but this shifter put them to shame. His features were not classically handsome, but even with my eyes starting to swell shut I could see that he was absolutely magnetic. I lowered my eyes. A part of me realized I was exhibiting typical prey behavior. The prey did not maintain eye contact with the predator. And this man radiated the power and strength of a predator.

I raised my gaze in defiance and considered my options as I studied him. It was too late to use a healing spell. It would drain me of what energy I had and wouldn't give me enough power to take him on. I had to gather my wits. My fingers met my blades, and I held them for reassurance.

I had been careless, but hoped it didn't mean I would die for it tonight.

He took in my appearance. I was sitting against the wall with one leg outstretched and a bent knee. I wondered what my face looked like, but I knew it wasn't pretty. A flicker of something crossed his face. I could have sworn it was anger. What did I do to merit the anger of a shifter I'd never seen before?

"You're the Slayer." He spoke with an authority that dared me to contradict him.

I tensed. There was no way he could have known that. My thumb stroked the dagger's sharp edge. I studied him for magic dispellers but couldn't see any telltale chains, bracelets, or rings. Not that my studying could have helped the situation, since I was in no condition to put up another fight. But how did he know who I was? There was no way anyone in the vampire lounge had known my true identity. They only knew me as Sebastian's half-witch ex-girlfriend. No, this shifter had to have received this information from the Enforcer, and I still didn't know how he knew. I narrowed my eyes. His knowledge of my identity still didn't explain how this shifter had known where I would be tonight.

My expression must have given me away, or he was a mind-reader, because he said, "We have a mutual acquaintance."

There were only two people who would tell this shifter where I was tonight — Mateu or Ibrahim. Of the two, I had my money on the vampire. I wondered how long Ibrahim had known I was the Supernatural Shadow and why he'd chosen to reveal it in this manner. But that answered how Enrique knew who I was, and how he'd found out.

"Who are you?" I asked the shifter.

He ignored my question. "I have a request."

It was funny how much the word "request" sounded like "order." I was surprised that I still lay on the ground with my leg outstretched instead of jumping to my feet and saluting him. His aura demanded immediate obedience. The stubborn side of me wanted to show him the complete opposite. I leaned back against the wall with a slouch, even as my fingers tightened around my dagger's hilt. "What is it?"

"Stop killing my shifters," he said in a low voice with a pause between the words, but I still flinched at the fury that those four words contained.

With a sinking feeling, I realized who this shifter was. Diego. Leader of all the shifters and the most powerful supernatural in Barcelona and surrounding areas.

Fire and brimstone.

My throat went dry. I licked my lips and somehow still managed a nonchalant response. "Why?"

"Why?" He blinked. His strong eyebrows knit together, showing his confusion more than the anger that was present only moments ago. It was almost as if he couldn't comprehend someone questioning him, as if no one had ever done it before. "Because I told you to stop."

I wondered what he was capable of when pushed, and what it would take to provoke him. I was pretty sure I knew, but a part of me

wanted to test it anyway.

"I'm just doing my job." I lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "If you did yours, then your shifters wouldn't make it on the boards."

A strange sound emerged from his throat. It resonated within me, terrifying the primal part of my brain that recognized itself as prey. He took a step forward, and I flinched. I wasn't ready for a fight. I was stupid to antagonize Diego, of all shifters. But this time I wouldn't let a supernatural just use me as a punching bag. I would use magic.

Diego stopped moving when I flinched. He made a turn, pacing back and forth. I watched him do it four times, and then he stopped and glared at me. "I've indulged your killings four times. There won't be a fifth."

I started. That was the exact number of shifters I had killed in Barcelona. He had known this whole time.

"Enrique says you two have a challenge set a month from now." His lips thinned into an angry line. It almost seemed like he wasn't happy with his Enforcer fighting me. "Give me your word that you won't kill any more shifters and I'll have him withdraw the challenge."

The offer was enticing, especially with my sore body and the spreading pain. But it wasn't a promise that I was sure I could keep, and I never gave my word unless I was sure I could keep it. In any case, I didn't want to take the offer because I still wanted to know how I measured up against Diego's Enforcer. It was an opportunity I just couldn't turn down. "I can't promise you that."

"He warned me that you were stubborn," he muttered under his breath. He probably thought I couldn't hear him. The "he" that Diego referred to could only be Ibrahim, and I wondered what else the vampire had said about me. Diego tucked his hands in his pockets and spoke at a normal volume again. "What will it take for you to stop attacking my shifters?"

"I'm not attacking your shifters."

Diego waited.

"I'm not." I scowled at him. "It's not like I'm going out of my way to kill them. I was doing my job."

He stopped pacing and turned his head toward me. "You're choosing to take on shifter bounties or assassinations. That's not you doing a job. That's you intentionally targeting my people. Do you know what I call someone that intentionally targets my people?"

I shook my head.

"An enemy." He spat out the word like a bad taste in his mouth. Diego began pacing back and forth again. He glared at me. "You don't want to be my enemy. I destroy my enemies."

"Am I supposed to be scared?" I didn't know how my voice came out so steady when I felt so woozy. I could hear my heart hammering

in my ears. Or that might just be my head throbbing. I couldn't decide which.

He stopped in front of me and frowned. He put his hands on his hips. "You should be. If you're not, you're an idiot. Are you an idiot?"

With the pose he'd struck, I couldn't help but to complete the superhero picture and imagine a cape fluttering behind him. I laid my head back against the wall. My brain seemed to rattle in my skull at the movement. The brick felt cool on my scalp. "Are you done?"

"No. I need your word that you won't go after more shifters."

"I told you I can't promise you that. Whether I'm working or walking around, if a shifter attacks me I'm going to fight back to the best of my abilities. Sometimes that means the shifter winds up dead." I winced and shut my eyes. My head was pounding harder after that long talk.

When I opened my eyes again, he was staring at me, his gaze calculating. "Will you refrain from taking on jobs that involve shifters?"

"No." He was the leader of the shifters, but he wasn't the boss of me. I know it sounded childish, but my head was beginning to really hurt now. I tried to focus on his face, but he kept moving. He had three frowns on his face. I'd never seen that on a shifter before. Perhaps he was trying to intimidate me. Or perhaps it was the concussion I almost certainly had.

"Fine. You'll be dead in a month's time." His eyes took in my beaten face. "If not sooner."

My body decided that would be a good time to pass out.

Chapter Nineteen

I blinked, and the world slowly swam into view. I turned my head and flinched at the throbbing pain that the small movement had caused. Hallway. I was in a hallway with my back against the wall. It took me a while to realize it was my apartment building's hallway. Raising my head and gritting my teeth against the pain, I looked at the number on the door.

I was home.

A chill went through me as I realized there was only one way I could have returned here. Diego was the last person I had seen before I had passed out. This was the strongest message he could have left me. We were both aware that he could have killed me at any moment, but this was worse still — he knew where I lived.

I struggled to my feet and unlocked the door. I made my way to my bathroom and stared at my face in the mirror. It looked bad, but it felt way worse than it looked. In the bathroom, I splashed cold water on my face and then walked over to my bed and dropped onto it. A small rectangle lay on my bedside table. Curious, I reached for it. It was Rafael's business card. I had forgotten all about it.

"Noor," I called out in a strangled voice.

"Yes?" Noor walked into my room. She ogled my face. "Fire and brimstone! What happened to your face? You look awful."

I ignored her concerned insult and held out Rafael's business card, waving it back and forth at her. "Did you know?"

She sat on my bed and reached out for the card. "Know what? What is this? What's going on? Why haven't you started a healing spell yet?" She placed the card back on the nightstand and looked at what I was sure was a mosaic of bruises and lacerations on my face.

"He's an Alliance agent." My mind was turning over every single detail of the previous night. An Alliance agent had been in my apartment. An Alliance agent had been in my bed.

Fire and brimstone. Zap it all to hell!

"Who?" She grabbed the card from table and squinted at it.

"Rafael."

"What? No!" She gaped at me, dropping the card as if it was poisonous. "Oh, zap! No zapping way. I'm sorry."

I threw my head back on my bed and grabbed a pillow to cover my face. I had invited an Alliance agent into my apartment, into my bed,

into the most personal corners of my body. He worked for the organization that was actively hunting me. He knew where I lived. This was bad. This was really bad. After all the precautions I had taken over the years, how could I be so careless? Diego was right. I was an idiot.

"How could you not know?" I couldn't help the notes of blame and anger that trickled into my voice.

"I just asked Leroy to bring a friend. I had no idea." Noor was apologetic. She reached out and removed the pillow before it smothered me.

"If you hadn't prevented us from talking about work, I would have known that night." I glared at her.

"Yes..." Noor paused. She raised both her eyebrows. "But then you wouldn't have gotten laid."

"I would have avoided sleeping with an Alliance agent!"

"But you like him," Noor protested.

"Aren't you listening to me? Obviously I can't see him again."

"Why not?" Noor raised her hands. "Don't look at me like that. I know the obvious reason, but he doesn't know what it is you do."

"He's an Alliance agent. It's too risky." I put his card on my bedside table. "Besides, I saw him with another woman."

"What? When? Where?" Noor was offended on my behalf. "Does he have a girlfriend too? Is that why he and Leroy are friends?"

"I saw him earlier tonight at the vampire lounge. She was a vampire."

Noor bit her lip. The topic of vampires was always a touchy one. I could see her wanting to say something, but before she could speak, a knock sounded on the front door. We looked at each other.

"Are you expecting anyone?" I asked her.

She frowned and shook her head. "At this hour? No."

"I'll get it. You keep an ear out in case it's trouble." I unsheathed my dagger and covered it with a sight shield. I reached the door just as another knock sounded. I put my eye against the peephole to see who it was.

I tucked the dagger into the back of my pants. On second thought, I removed it and held it lightly in my left hand. Noor waited in the hall. I turned to her and shook my head, waving an all-clear.

I took a deep breath and swung the door open, revealing Rafael on my doorstep.

He stared at me, a range of emotions crossing his face. Surprise. Shock. Anger. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing." I gripped the door tighter and didn't invite him in.

"That's not nothing." He gestured at my face. He reached up as if to touch me, but he reconsidered, his hand dropping to his side and

forming into a fist. "Who attacked you? Was it a vampire from the lounge? Who was it?"

"It's none of your concern." The last thing I needed was an Alliance agent digging into the incident. I was making thoughtless mistakes. I should have used an illusion spell to hide my bruises before I opened the door.

"Can I come in? We need to talk." Rafael glanced over my shoulder into the apartment.

"You don't need to explain anything." I kept my hand on the door, preventing him from entering.

"Yes, I do." He ran his hand through his hair. "I was on the job when you saw me, and I couldn't explain at the lounge."

"I told you, there's no need to explain." I paused. There was no reason to drag this out any further. "Listen, we had fun last night, and we left on good terms. Let's leave it at that." Despite the rational part of my mind screaming at me that he was an Alliance agent and that the whole thing was a terrible idea, that simple motion of running his fingers through his hair had set my heart racing. I wanted to jump him, sore body be damned.

"I want to see you again." His mouth was set in a stubborn line.

I wanted to lean in and kiss those lips, soften that hard line. But it was too risky. He was Alliance. I licked my lips. His eyes followed the motion. I cleared my throat. *Focus.* "Remember when Noor said I was a workaholic? Well, she was telling the truth. I don't have room for someone in my life."

"I don't take up much space," Rafael said quickly before I could shut the door.

I paused. He didn't believe my excuse. He probably thought I was upset about seeing him with the woman. He didn't know it was more than that.

My throat was dry. I wondered if there was a way to make it work, but I knew it was insanity. I couldn't allow myself to think that way.

He broke the awkward silence. "I have first-aid training. Can I take care of you? Let me help. Please?"

That "please" nearly destroyed my resolve. I shook my head, clearing away thoughts of us playing doctor. "Thank you, but no, I'll be fine."

His eyes searched my face. He waited a beat, then said, "I'm not the type of guy who chases after a woman and harasses her. I'll respect your wishes, but I really hope you'll change your mind and call me. You have my number. I'll be waiting." With reluctance, he turned away and left.

I shut the door softly and leaned against it. I closed my eyes. That had been harder than I'd expected.

"You're crazy," Noor said from the hallway.

My eyes snapped open. I glared at her. "No, what's crazy is dating an Alliance agent and running around assassinating people at the same time."

"He came all the way from the lounge to clear up a misunderstanding." Noor was a sucker for sensitive guys. "He didn't even wait for the next day. He's cute. Why can't you give him a chance?"

"Do you want me locked away for life?" I asked her.

"Of course not." She was indignant.

"Then you better make sure he doesn't come back here again." I wouldn't put it past her to try to make it work, despite my threats.

"Fine," Noor sighed. "And here I thought you broke your one-night-stand curse. I thought this would turn into a relationship."

"I don't think I'm cut out for relationships," I confessed.

"Well, at least you had fun while it lasted." She padded back to her room. "Start a healing spell. Your face looks awful," she called out over her shoulder.

As she walked away, I realized I hadn't told her about Diego. I sighed. It would keep until tomorrow.

Chapter Twenty

I managed to get a few hours of sleep that night. The healing spells helped remove traces of the fight, but the magic made me feel sluggish as it drained what little energy I had left. I spent a little longer at the apartment, vegging out on the couch and watching anime until I felt more like myself.

There wasn't much I could do about my vampire target during the day. It was true that they could emerge in daylight, but vampires were still nocturnal creatures and kept those hours. I decided to go to the bounty office to see if anyone had sent a hit out on my target. It was helpful to know if I had a competitor working the same job.

The weather reflected my mood: clouds roiled on the horizon and threatened rain. I pulled my jacket closer around my body to block out the chilly wind. It was brisk for a September day. As I walked, I thought back on all the events from last night and was forced to think about how I had returned home the previous night. I wondered if Diego had personally carried me back to my apartment or if he had ordered one of his shifters to do it. Regardless of who did it, it bothered me more than I could admit. And I'd never be able to ask him for the answer. It was too humiliating.

By the time I entered the bounty office, I was in a foul mood. It took a tremendous effort not to take it out on Sandra. "Hi, Sandra. Is Javier in?"

"He always is." Her eyes expressed her concern. I knew I probably didn't look too great, despite my healing spells.

"So are you." I tried to keep the same light tone I usually had.

"He holds us to his standards. It's a tough life." Sandra pretended to complain. She loved her job. Her two sons had left home years ago and hadn't given her any grandchildren yet. Sandra gave me a gentle smile. "What's got you so down? You're alive and you're not on the boards. Cheer up."

I attempted a weak smile for her, but it felt more like a grimace.

"That's better," she chirped.

I gave her a wave and continued down the hall toward Javier's office.

He looked up in surprise when he saw me. "Back so soon? I thought you were going on vacation. I hadn't found another job that suits your talents. Everything I have is small-fry."

"What can I say? I get bored." I sat in the empty seat and stretched my legs.

The dwarf scratched his chin. "Do you want the small jobs? Are you saying I don't give you enough work?"

"No." I shook my head. "I just passed by to see if there was anything interesting."

He studied me. "What are you after?"

"Do you have any shifter or vampire bounties?"

Javier narrowed his eyes. "Looking for trouble? You know those are rare, and no, none of them have made their way across my desk since your last visit. You know the shifters and vampires settle their disputes privately — for the most part. I'm still looking into the one you did the other night. What made you think there would be another one here?"

"There's always hope." I shrugged.

"Who pissed you off?" Javier grinned at me. "The shifter or the vampire? Or both?"

A sharp pain caused me to reach up and press my fingers lightly against my face where Ethan had punched me the night before. The healing spells had removed all traces of the beating, but the pain was still there. I shook my head, trying to clear it. "Have you ever had vampires put out bounties? With your knowledge, I mean…" My voice trailed off.

"No, it's incredibly rare for them to outsource. They have all their own people, and with their bloodlines nonsense they don't need to pay money to get someone to do their work for them. I still can't work out the story with that demon. It doesn't make sense. I've been looking at their history of jobs and trying to figure out if they've killed them all." Javier shook his head and looked down at the several files sprawled across his desk.

"What if they used you to cover their tracks? Do you ever worry about getting involved in their politics?"

"What's going on, Aisha?" Javier stared at me. "What do you know that you're not telling me? Is this to do with the demon?"

"Nothing, I'm just restless." I got to my feet. "I guess I should go bother someone else. Could you do me a favor and let me know if any interesting work comes your way? Don't give it to Luke or Tahani. I need to keep busy."

I could tell that Javier wasn't convinced, but he nodded slowly. "Sure, you'll be at the top of my list."

With a wave, I strolled back out of his office, deep in thought. The vampires were using a front. There had to be a reason behind it. Vampires wouldn't involve outsiders unless there was a good reason. I had researched Donnie the demon, but it appeared there was more to

the story. Did I want to find out more?

I glanced at the Alliance's most-wanted posters, unpinned the Supernatural Shadow notice, and rolled it up.

I said goodbye to Sandra as I left the bounty office. She gave me a cheery wave goodbye, but didn't say anything about the large poster I carried away with me.

Chapter Twenty-One

The music blaring from the multiple speakers around the place was so loud I could barely hear myself think. Reconnaissance work had taken up most of my time in the past two days. I had identified which vampire lounges Sloan Nicholi had invested in and found his real estate holdings. I had kept myself so busy I hadn't even had time to see Noor. She'd be upset that I was at another vampire lounge without her.

There was no need for an escort this time. This vampire lounge, Shades, accepted all supernaturals. Despite that open-door policy, the place was still dominated by vampires. There was a dance floor at the center of the lounge and tables lining both side walls. On the far end of the building was the bar. The other end housed the DJ booth.

I made my way across the dance floor, squeezing through the writhing bodies, heading toward the bar. It would be quieter there. I identified supernaturals by reflex as I passed: demons, goblins, vampires, korrigans, pixies, and veela. There were even a couple angels.

I recognized the succubus that had been on Javier's roster. I wondered how much the job paid to turn her in, but decided against it and shook my head. I had to focus on my primary target. I pulled out my phone and texted Javier. Just because I couldn't take the job didn't mean I couldn't let someone else make some easy money.

Almost at the bar, I cursed my luck. I wondered when my life had turned into one cosmic joke. Rafael was sitting a few tables down with a group of people. I studied his profile before turning my gaze to the people he was with. They were about half a dozen elite vampires I recognized from the society pages.

One of them was my target. Sloan Nicholi.

Zap it all to hell.

I went up to the bar, ignoring Rafael, and ordered a drink from the bartender. I wondered how I could make the best of this situation. I had to be careful and recalibrate my approach. Based on my knowledge of vampires and their twisted thinking, I knew what made them tick. They were competitive, and they liked to win.

It would be a risky proposition, but I could use Rafael as bait to lure my target in. If it worked, I wouldn't have to wait all night and follow my target later. The faster I finished the job the sooner I got

paid, but it was high risk.

I debated the merits of doing the job with an Alliance agent not even ten feet away. It was almost as if I was asking for trouble. But if I could do it right, I'd kill the vampire and dispose of the body and Rafael wouldn't know it was me.

There was a chance I wouldn't find my target again if I was scared off by Rafael. I took a sip of my drink and turned to stare at the vampire. What had brought him to Rafael's circle? After a couple of minutes, my target felt my gaze and turned to me. I allowed a small smile to grow on my face, then moved my head to face the bar and took sip of my drink. The action elongated my neck, exposing it to the vampire. It was a classic flirting move that worked better than flashing cleavage. Show a vampire your neck and they would know you were interested. I brushed back my long hair, showcasing a lot of neck. *Come to me.*

I remained at the bar and made small talk with the bartender. From time to time, I picked up my drink and repeated the motion, making sure my neck was in full view of the vampire. Sure enough, within minutes someone stood at my shoulder. I prepared a smile and looked up from beneath my lashes. My smile melted away instantly.

"You look better," Rafael said. His eyes roamed over my features.

"I heal fast." The magical spells helped. That was why I needed a couple days of downtime before getting back to it.

"I thought you were busy with work," he said. It wasn't quite an accusation, but almost. His gaze traveled down to take in my crop top and tight leggings.

I didn't answer him. I didn't need to.

He sighed when I didn't respond. "I promised you I wouldn't bother you. I just wanted to make sure you're okay." The intensity of his gaze made me flush. It also reminded me that I was working.

"You're still at work?" I eyed the group at his table.

My target was watching us. I couldn't let Rafael ruin my plan. I gave the vampire a slow smile. I knew he was trying to figure out my relationship with Rafael. I intentionally turned my body away from Rafael. Most communication was non-verbal, and I needed to make sure that the vampire would read that I was not interested in Rafael.

Rafael picked up on the cue first. He gave me a sad smile. "I'm glad you're better. You have my number. Or I'll see you around." He left and walked back to the table.

I took a sip of my drink and started a count in my head. Before I could get to ten, someone else had approached me.

"Do I know you?" a raspy voice asked me.

I swiveled on my stool. I tilted my head and shook it. "I don't think so."

"Are you sure?" He stared at my neck.

Bingo. I allowed a small smile to spread across my face and lowered my lids. "Do you want to get to know me?"

"I would love to." He settled on the stool next to me and glanced at my half-empty glass. "Can I get you a drink?"

"I wouldn't let the last man do that." I ran my fingers through my wavy hair.

"I'm not like him."

He was right, he wasn't. Where Rafael was charismatic, this vampire was repulsive. I raised my glass to my lips to cover my distaste. I emptied the glass and pouted. "Will you look at that? It seems I've finished my drink."

"Let me get you another one. Would you like more of the same?"

I nodded, and he raised his hand, signaling the bartender.

"Sorry, I've been rude. I didn't even ask." I tilted my head to the bar and brushed my hair back with my right hand, exposing more of my neck. I felt his gaze burning into me. "Do you want a drink?"

His mouth opened, revealing his half-extended fangs. He licked a sharp incisor. "I'd love that."

"What kind of blood do you drink? I'll order you one." I made to raise my hand.

He shook his head. "No, I can't stand the preserved blood they serve in here. They don't carry underage blood, despite me owning part of this place. Isn't it ridiculous? It's the modern political climate. Why can't we have nice things? Since I can't get what I prefer, I like organic blood straight from the source." His gaze practically tore my throat open.

The bartender placed a new glass in front of me.

My skin crawled at his preference. I was glad I had taken on this job. "Do you have a favorite type?" I took a sip of my drink. I slowly licked my lips afterward.

"I drink it all, but my favorite is B-positive."

I feigned surprise. "No way! That's my blood type," I lied to him.

"What a happy coincidence." His eyes grew dark. His mouth opened slightly, and his fangs extended fully.

"Can I tell you one of my fantasies?" I ran my fingers lightly against my throat.

"Of course." His eyes were mesmerized by the movement.

"I've always fantasized about coming to a vampire lounge, meeting a handsome stranger, and going out back for a little necking." I laughed lightly. "Isn't that silly? I mean, who would do that with a stranger?"

"Funny, I have a fantasy that's kind of similar." He smirked.

"Yeah?" I encouraged him to continue. I ran my fingers through my

curls again. I pushed one of my bobby pins that had gotten loose. My left hand absently ran circles around my concealed dagger.

"Yes, I've always wanted to meet a beautiful stranger, take her out back, and have a drink with her."

I reached out my right hand and stroked his left arm. My smile grew. "How about we go make your fantasy a reality?"

"I'd love to." The vampire rose and pulled me to my feet.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The vampire pulled me off the stool, and I allowed myself to stumble against his chest. His arms caught me. I laughed, leading him on. He placed his hand on the small of my back, guiding me forward. His hand lowered slightly, but I used my hand to hold his in place before it could move any lower. I may have been flirting, but I was still on the job and I wasn't going to let him grope me.

We made our way through the throng of people. I didn't dare look at Rafael. I didn't need him to follow me. This would be a quick job, and I could leave and collect my money. When we'd gotten halfway across the dance floor a succubus grabbed Nicholi and kissed him on the mouth, smearing his face with dark lipstick. He snarled at her and pushed her away, glancing at me apologetically. I smiled, and he calmed down with the knowledge that I wouldn't take offense.

We moved through the pulsing swarm of dancers. I brushed against the bodies, pushing past them. A drunk demon swayed near me. She raised her glass at me. "Cloves and brimstone! Cloves and brimstone!" Her friends grabbed her, pulling her back to their table.

We finally made it through the crowd, and my target pulled me along. We stumbled through a hallway and he took me to the lounge's back door. He pushed it open and stepped outside. I followed him. He turned to me and raised both hands to stroke my dark waves. "I love your hair."

I tilted my head, giving him another glimpse at my neck. I rearranged my expression into what I hoped was an alluring smile. "Start slow, alright?"

He laughed and sniffed at my neck. I felt his fangs graze me. I only had a moment left to do what I had to do. I hadn't spotted any magic dispellers, but that didn't mean they weren't there. The element of surprise is powerful, but it can only be used once.

"I can feel your pulse racing," he whispered into my neck.

"Mmhmm," I murmured. I shifted my body closer to him, reaching up to hold the back of his neck with my right hand as my left hand skimmed his chest and lowered to his stomach. I removed my left hand, reached behind my back, and grabbed my dagger. With a swift motion I stabbed him in the stomach where my hand had been a second before, wrenching my neck away from his teeth. The last thing I needed right now was a neck full of fangs.

He groaned, trying to lurch away from me, but I kept my grip tight around his neck. His eyes blazed with desire. "Oh, you like it rough? Is your fantasy trying to protect yourself from the big bad vampire?"

I blinked. I had stabbed him, and he thought it was a game. In answer, I twisted the dagger, moving it farther up toward his heart.

He finally realized that wasn't part of my fantasy. It was a very real attack, and he was in danger. His eyes darkened, and he reached for my throat. I let go of his neck and jumped away from his grip. My dagger was still in him, and he roared with pain.

He swiped at me, and I took the opportunity to pull my other dagger out. It was time to test if he had any magic dispellers on his body. I pulled at my magic and whispered an incantation under my breath, adding more power to my dagger.

He stood against the wall and placed a hand on his stomach. He pulled away his hand and stared at the blood on it. His eyes were murderous when they turned back to me. "You're going to pay for this, you hellcat." He hurled himself off the wall and flew at me.

I dodged him, slicing at his side. He howled as my blade tore through his clothing and made contact with his flesh. Good. He wasn't wearing any magic dispellers.

"Who are you?" he panted, eyes wide. That was usually the reaction to my speed.

"It seems like you've been upsetting people with your shenanigans. Someone's paying me to make sure you never get up again."

"Who is it? I'll pay you double what they're paying. Triple, even!" the vampire pleaded.

Once I took a job I was committed to it. I didn't take money to walk away. I shook my head. "It doesn't work that way."

The client had instructed that I deliver a message upon killing the target. Whoever it was had wanted the vampire to know that they had placed the kill, and I said the words that I was told to share with the target. "Katya says hello."

"No," he said. The vampire's eyes widened, and a hiss emerged. "No. They cannot have forsaken me in this manner."

I had no idea what he was talking about, or who this Katya was. It was none of my business. I lurched forward and plunged my dagger into his heart. The power of my spell got it through his chest. It pierced true.

The vampire clawed at me, trying to wrap his hands around the dagger to pull it out, but he weakened the longer I held it there. I clung on as he struggled until his body went limp and slid to the ground.

He was finally down. I stared at him lying with his eyes open and staring at nothing. I chanted a spell to open his chest cavity. His heart

pulsed inside. I cut it out to ensure he never got up again.

It took me a couple minutes to sever his heart. When I was done, I placed the heart on the ground beside the body. I looked at my work and got to my feet. I would have to take a picture of the body and send it to the client so they knew the job was done, but I had to send a picture of the destroyed heart. I reached down and picked up the still-warm heart, but before I could destroy it, I was interrupted.

A creak sounded as the door opened behind me. There wasn't time to cast an invisibility spell. I turned around to see who it was. I raised my hands. A quick memory spell would do just as well.

Or not.

Rafael stood there looking down at my bloody hands and the dead body at my feet.

Fire and brimstone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We stared at each other in silence. Rafael took in the sight of me standing over a dead vampire with a heart in my bloody hands. Before I could say anything, a wry smile crossed his face.

"And here I was coming outside because I was worried about you. Maybe I should have asked you what the other person looked like after that fight a few days ago." Rafael shook his head. I could tell he was trying to reconcile his feelings for me and his obligations as an Alliance agent.

I quickly calculated my options. I could escape, but he knew where I lived, which meant Noor was exposed. He knew where Leroy had met her. It would lead an easy trail back to her family. All of these were things that could be used against me. I'd have to make the best of the situation.

"You're under arrest." He reached into his pockets and pulled out a set of handcuffs. Marching over to where I stood, he said, "Drop the heart."

I let it fall from my hands as instructed. It made a soft, squelching plop as it hit the concrete.

The two of us looked down at it.

I glanced back up at Rafael, and I could have sworn he was trying not to laugh.

He took my bloody hands in his and cuffed me. He was gentle as he clipped the handcuffs around my wrists. Without hesitation, he removed his jacket and draped it over my cuffed hands, seemingly indifferent to the blood on them. I stood in silence while he took out his phone and dialed a number. "I need a team down at Shades. Dead vampire." He hung up.

He used his phone to take photographs of the scene. Briefly, I wondered if I could get them from him to ensure payment for the job. I almost laughed at my thoughts. Before I could even think about money, I had to get myself out of this predicament.

Rafael shook his head as he studied the body of the dead vampire and the gaping hole where his heart had been. His gaze turned to me. "We'll have to go out the front. Don't make a scene," he warned me.

He put an arm around my waist and let me back into the lounge. As he guided me through the crowd to the front door, I wondered why he didn't avoid the lounge and just leave from the back. We passed the

table of elite vampires, and Rafael smiled and waved at them. From where they sat it simply looked like he had decided to go home with a woman. He was trying to maintain his cover. He gestured at someone, and the vampire came over.

"Yes, Agent? Is there any way I can help you?" the vampire asked Rafael.

"There's a mess out back. The suspect is in custody."

"Thank you for letting me know." The vampire spared a glance at me. I wondered if he was the lounge owner or just a manager.

"A few people will be coming over. I'd appreciate you keeping the scene secure and untouched until they get here."

"Of course, I'll put a guard on the back door."

"And the alley," Rafael added.

"And the alley," the vampire agreed.

We left the lounge and stepped out into the cool night air. Echoes of the pulsing music still pounded in my head. My thoughts whirled as I tried to untangle the mess I was in. There were several options, but each one ended badly. I'd have to be careful how I played this.

"I had to do that, or a hit would be placed on you," Rafael said in a low voice. "Vampires take vampire kills very seriously, as I'm sure you know."

I remained silent. He led me to his car and helped me get into the front passenger seat. My cuffs were loose enough that I could have done it myself. He closed the door and walked around to his side. He got in the driver's seat, started the car, and pulled away from the curb. We drove in silence for a few minutes.

"So, I'm going to make a few guesses and you're going to tell me if I'm right." Rafael stared at the road ahead. Traffic was light at this hour, but his fingers were clenched around the wheel.

My answers would depend on his questions. It would be best not to say anything at all, but I had pretty much incriminated myself. A quick forensics check would confirm I was the vampire's killer. There was no way around this one.

"Does your work involve late nights?" Rafael asked me.

"Yes." *Sometimes.*

"Does it involve research?"

"Yes." *These are really vague questions.*

"Does it involve copious amounts of money in return for results?"

"Yes." Thankfully I never put all my eggs in one basket. The Alliance wouldn't be able to track down all my assets.

I raised my cuffed hands to brush my hair away from the side of my face. The jacket was in my way, but I managed to fix my hair.

Rafael reached out and tucked in a few strands behind my ear. "Better?"

"Yes, thank you." I returned my hands to my lap.

Rafael stopped asking questions and was silent for a few minutes. I snuck a glance at him, and his eyes seemed thoughtful. His jaw was tight, letting me know that he wasn't as nonchalant with the situation as he appeared to be. His eyes briefly left the road to look at me. "So, I slept with number three on the Alliance's most-wanted list."

I was impressed by how quickly he had put it together. I wasn't going to lie to him. I was really tempted to answer yes, but even I wasn’t dumb enough to admit it. Careless yes, stupid no. He only had one dead body, and I could probably plead self-defense. I didn't have to give him other charges to throw my way.

He gave me a wry smile. "I wasn't really expecting a confession."

I shrugged. I didn't have to make it easy for him. It was too late for me to approach this any other way. I had to think about my next move and try to make the best of the situation.

The car slowed, and Rafael parked in front of a building. We had arrived at the Alliance headquarters. I looked out the window at the structure. This building was full of people that had hunted me for years. And all it had taken to get here was a rash decision on my part and too much concern on someone else's.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rafael escorted me inside the headquarters of the Alliance of Supernatural Protectors, my cuffed hands in front of me covered by his jacket.

There was a single guard at the door. I had expected more security. I wondered what counter-measures they had in place. I glanced down and realized my weapons belt was visible. I hadn't felt any wards as I crossed the threshold, but I knew they must have had something. We walked over to the elevators and waited for one to appear. Once inside, Rafael pushed the button for the seventh floor.

The doors of the elevator opened, and I stepped out into an open-floor setting. There were plenty of cubicles, but only a quarter seemed occupied. I figured that the staff here worked late hours or were simply working overtime. A few people glanced at us as Rafael marched me across the floor, his hand still clutching my upper arm.

He opened a door and led me inside. It was an interrogation room with a single table, two metal chairs, and a two-way mirror.

"I'm sorry, it's protocol." Rafael motioned to one of the chairs, and I complied. Once seated, he removed his jacket from my fists and attached my cuffs to the table. The sight of my incarceration appeared to bother him, because he draped his jacket over them once more. I wondered idly if he'd ever be able to wash the bloodstains out of the jacket.

"You'll be here a while. Is there anything you need?" Rafael's lips pressed together in a thin line.

I wanted to wash my hands, but this wasn't the time to tell him that. I shook my head, appreciating the consideration. I was pretty sure this wasn't how most agents treated their detainees.

Rafael left the room, closing the door behind him. I stared at the two-way mirror, taking in my appearance. My crop top was rumpled. My hair wasn't too bad, considering. I had a streak of blood where I had brushed my hair out of my face in the car. My face looked bored. I wondered if there was anyone on the other side of that glass yet. If there was, they must have been getting quite the show. I was sure that I looked just ravishing, bloody face and all. I turned my gaze back to the jacket covering my hands. I unclenched my fists and moved my fingers, feeling how tight the cuffs were. They weren't loose enough for me to slide my wrists out, but they were just loose enough that I

wouldn't have bruises from the metal. I was pretty sure they were magicked cuffs, which meant a spell wouldn't work on them. I looked around the small room, wondering if there were any magic dispellers. Probably. I searched, but all I saw was a camera in the corner with a red light.

I chanted aloud, a spell that would make the door open wide. Nothing happened. I gave my reflection a crooked grin. I had to try.

After twenty minutes of waiting, the door finally opened. A man walked in. He raised his face ever so slightly to sniff the air. Shifter. I narrowed my eyes. I wondered what type he was. His movements were confident as he made his way to the chair across from me.

His golden eyes took in the jacket over my hands. He didn't exhibit surprise, so I knew he must have observed me behind that two-way mirror before coming in.

"My name's Leon." His voice had a smoker's rasp to it. "I run this branch of the Alliance. Rafael tells me you go by the name Aisha. Is that your real name?"

There was no point lying about that, so I nodded.

"I can't believe I'm finally meeting the legendary Supernatural Shadow. You've proven to be quite elusive. We wasted a lot of manpower in our search for you." The tone of his voice almost sounded as if he was awestruck by my presence. Almost.

He could call me the Supernatural Shadow all he wanted to, but he didn't have any proof that I was. I remained silent.

"We've attributed thirty-two kills to you." He leaned back in his chair.

I kept my head straight and looked directly at him. He didn't need to know that the number was higher. That was only a fifth of my kills. Despite his feigned relaxed pose, I knew he was paying attention to every word I said and every gesture I made.

"Of course, we're expecting you to deny you're the Supernatural Shadow. Maybe you'll even claim self-defense to justify the slaughter of that vampire at the lounge. Rafael claimed to have seen a dagger at the scene, but it disappeared before our team showed up. Some kind of retrieval spell, I assume? It's quite smart. Here's the thing." Leon leaned forward. "We knew who you were *before* Rafael met you."

I tried to keep my expression neutral, but I must have twitched, because a small smile appeared on his face.

"Yes, we've been suspicious of your activities for some time, we just never had actual proof. So, we assigned an agent to get close to you."

I frowned.

"That doesn't make you happy, does it?" Leon looked smug. The expression on his face definitely had a feline touch to it. His smile

widened, and he reminded me of the Cheshire Cat. "From what I hear, he got a little closer than he should have, but he's always operated outside the system."

Leon was wrong. I had compartmentalized my emotions. The knowledge that Rafael slept with me because it was his job didn't upset me. That wasn't what had surprised me. I wanted to know how they'd found me in the first place, and when they had started their surveillance. How much did they know about my life?

My system had failed somewhere along the way. There were only two answers: either I had been sloppy on a job, or someone had given me up. I'd thought my network was solid, but I knew that Ibrahim had already shared information with the dragon shifter, Diego. Had he fed information to the Alliance as well? Or had it been Mateu? Both the vampire or the gargoyle's betrayal would hurt more than the fact that Rafael's attentions had ulterior motives.

Leon went on. "We usually discipline agents that blur the boundaries between work and personal life, but he found evidence of your identity at your home. You're going to go away for a long time."

My face flushed at my stupidity. I had given myself away. I hadn't had time to put away my things after my job due to Noor's insistence that we leave immediately. And when I brought Rafael home, we had been too engrossed in each other for me to clear out my room. I had been irresponsible enough to leave him alone in my room when I could have distracted him. Or I could have cleaned up while he slept. Noor was right — I was crazy for leaving him in my bed.

"Is there anything you'd like to say before we lock you away forever?" Leon asked, that smug smile still on his lips. "No proclamations of innocence? Statements that you've been wronged? Claims that it was self-defense?"

I removed my hands from beneath Rafael's jacket. Leon stiffened, and his eyes were wide as they followed my movements. I rubbed my wrists. The blood had dried, and flakes of it fell onto the table.

Spells didn't work on magicked cuffs, but a bobby pin worked just fine. I had unlocked them before Leon had even entered the room. The jacket covered my movements perfectly. There was a reason I always kept bobby pins in my hair.

I folded Rafael's jacket and put it on the corner of the table. He was going to have to throw it away or burn it, because I doubted there was any way to get the stains out of that jacket. A shame — it was a really nice one.

Leon's golden gaze never left me. I set my elbows on the table, held my hands together, and twiddled my thumbs.

He stared at my bloody hands and lifted his eyes to my face.

"I'm sure we can come to a compromise." I gave him a wide smile.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I heard the door's lock click before I saw it open. Leon's eyes never left mine. Smart cat. He knew where the threat was.

I glanced at the person who entered: Rafael. Leon gave a small shake of his head. The door closed, and Rafael leaned against it. No exit that way. I winked at him. He smirked and looked down, trying to compose himself, but to no avail.

"You're going to have to burn that jacket," I told him. “It stinks of vampire.”

"A shame. It was my favorite," Rafael said drily.

"I'll buy you a new one once I'm out of here."

"We've reached the stage where you start to dress me?"

I arched an eyebrow. I had already undressed him. A crooked grin spread across his face. The fae had the same twisted sense of humor that I did.

"Are you done flirting?" Leon said, a growl underscoring his words.

Rafael blinked. He seemed to remember where we were. The smile disappeared from his face as he put on a professional expression.

My gaze turned to Leon. "I'm not interested in being locked up."

The feline studied me. "You're a criminal."

I shrugged. “So are many other people.”

"You've killed people," he told me.

"I'm sure you have, too."

"I don't do it for money."

"You work here for free?" I tilted my head, surprised.

Rafael coughed. Leon's face grew dark.

"Like I said, I'm sure we can come to a compromise. Make me an offer." I clasped my hands together.

Leon remained quiet for a few seconds. I kept still. I needed the shifter to be in a good mood to ensure I got a good deal. I wondered what their plan for me had been. There was no way that they’d surveilled me as much as they had just so they could lock me away. I had knowledge they wanted — I just didn't know what it was. And I needed Leon to show me his cards.

With begrudging reluctance, Leon said, "Indeed, there's always room for compromise. You have skills we need. Would you consider working for us?"

"With," I corrected him.

"Working *with* us," Leon amended.

I leaned back in my chair. "Draw up the contract. And bring some water for me to clean my hands. I hate the smell of dried blood."

His golden eyes still trained on me, Leon raised his hand, and Rafael left the room. I didn't move and stared back at the shifter. He lowered his hand, and we waited.

We seemed to be in the middle of a blinking game. I tried to outlast him, but within a minute the door opened and I blinked. A different person stepped inside the room. He didn't say anything as he walked over and handed Leon several sheets of paper and a pen. I narrowed my eyes. They had been prepared to bring me in and strike a deal. The man left the room.

Leon pushed the papers toward me, but he kept the pen. Smart man.

I started scanning the first page, making sure not to touch it with my bloody hands. I looked up from the document. "This contract says five years. I'll commit myself to two."

"Thirty-two bodies," Leon warned.

"Two years." I wondered how many years they would add if they knew the real number of bodies.

"Thirty-three with the vampire."

"Two years," I repeated.

"You'll be locked away for a very long time," Leon growled. "You'll never see the sky again."

"You need me." Leon had given himself away by continuing to negotiate with me. I didn't know why they wanted me to work for them, but I wasn't going to sign a long contract when I knew I could swing it in my favor. "Two years or just go ahead and send me to jail. I could use the vacation." I allowed myself a smile, but it never reached my eyes.

Rafael stepped back into the room holding a water bottle and a box of tissues. Leon shot Rafael an incredulous look, but he just shrugged in return.

I wasn't angry at him, but I didn’t know why. Even though my body was so focused on Rafael in the beginning, I think I had sensed something was off early on. It was like my gut had known before my brain did. It made reconciling his betrayal easier to stomach.

"I'll go work on the contract." Leon stood and left us alone in the room.

Rafael came forward and put the box of tissues on the table. He took out a few, removed the cap from the water bottle, and poured some water over the tissues in his hand. He bent down on one knee, took my left hand in his, and started wiping the blood from it. It was a strangely intimate gesture.

I watched him clear the blood from my hand. "You know you're taking a risk being in this room with my hands free. You didn't even frisk me for weapons," I said. The wards had only revealed what was over my clothes, not under them.

He met my eyes and raised an eyebrow. "You want me to frisk you? In here? With people watching behind that mirror?" he asked me in a low voice. He chuckled lightly and looked back down to the task. His fingers stroked the top of my hand, his implication clear. The heat rushed to my face. Even with his lowered head, I could see his crooked smile.

Rafael leaned forward and focused on scraping the blood from under my nails. I looked down at his head. We were both aware that he was putting himself at my mercy. I could twist his neck so easily with him being in such a vulnerable position. I knew the door to the interrogation room was unlocked because I hadn't heard a key twist. I had no idea how many agents were stationed outside the room, but I would have to make it across the floor to reach the elevators. I had thought of this all while I waited the first twenty minutes. I didn't know if Rafael was simply an experienced agent and confident in his abilities to subdue me, or if he actually trusted me not to kill him. Inexplicably, it made me feel better.

"This is weird," I finally said as he continued to clean my hands. He had moved onto my right hand.

"That's life. You just have to roll with the arrests."

"Funny."

He shrugged. "My offer still stands."

"What offer?"

He paused. His moss-green eyes met mine once more. The intensity of his stare made my breath catch in my throat. "You have my card. Call me."

I couldn't believe he was still interested in pursuing me. Maybe not a relationship, but he wanted *something*. Crazier yet was that I was considering it, too.

The only thought in my head was that Noor was going to freak out.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Leon came back into the interrogation room and left the door open behind him. I noticed immediately that he didn't have any papers in his hands. I kept my expression neutral.

The shifter gave me a wry smile. "They're still working on adjusting the terms of your contract. In the meantime, we'd like it if you could give us a display."

I rolled my shoulders and repressed a sigh. "What did you have in mind?"

"Your skills against some of the Alliance's best."

A side glance at Rafael showed he wasn't surprised by this development. I got to my feet. "Let's go."

Leon's smile widened. Rafael stood up. Leon turned around and moved out of the room. I followed him with Rafael trailing behind me.

I didn't notice anyone as I walked across the floor. The same people that had been there when I showed up appeared to be working in their cubicles. Was it possible that the Alliance didn't think I was worth any extra security? I frowned. No, they were just so confident that they could capture me easily that they didn't need to place extra layers of protection on my person.

We reached the elevators and waited for the doors to open. We stepped in, and Leon hit the button for the top floor. The doors opened, and Leon waited for me to exit before stepping out after me. I looked around. It was an open space with hardwood floors. It reminded me of a gymnasium. There were bleachers along opposite walls, and I counted about two dozen people sitting on them. I frowned.

Leon walked to the center of the room. I followed. My gaze shifted from one person to the next, but I could feel Rafael at my elbow. Leon turned around to face me. "We thought you were a man at first, you know. It was Rafael that reminded us that women can be killers, too."

I glanced at Rafael, and he gave me a rueful shrug.

Leon continued, "The room here is free of magic dispellers. You'll be able to use whatever spells you have in your arsenal. We want to see what we'll get for those two years."

"I don't usually use magic when I fight."

Leon shrugged. "Do whatever it is you do. I'm just letting you know it will be a fair fight."

"Who will I be fighting?"

Leon pointed at the people in the bleachers. "As many of them as you can take."

Rafael looked thoughtful. "Do you need anything?"

"Yes."

He and Leon waited expectantly.

"I need to stretch."

They exchanged glances and walked away to the bleachers, leaving me standing alone in the center of the room. I rolled my shoulders. This hadn't been what I was expecting, but it certainly was going to be interesting. I wondered how I would fare against the Alliance's best. I was glad I had worn my black leggings and a cropped top to go to the lounge — pretty much the same outfit I wore when working out, so movement would be easy. I started with a series of jumping jacks to get my heart rate up, then proceeded with my training exercises.

I withdrew my daggers from their sheaths and my hands whirled in a sequence of attack and counterattack moves. My muscles warmed up as I repeated the moves over and over. By the time I was done, sweat was dripping down my face. I stretched my muscles and turned to the bleachers. A couple of them stared wide-eyed. A sharp sense of satisfaction flowed through me. If they were impressed by my warm-up, then I was eager to see how they'd react to the main show.

Rafael came to me and handed me a towel and small bottle of water. I wet my lips with it, allowing a small trickle down my throat. He didn't speak after I handed him back the towel. He turned and walked away.

Leon raised his hand and at his gesture, a man got to his feet. He was a tall, bulky fellow. Striding powerfully, he made his way toward me. He raised his head slightly once he reached me. Shifter. From his hulking frame, I guessed he was a bear shifter.

"I'm Aisha."

His deep-set eyes just looked at me.

I shrugged. "You don't like small talk, huh? That's alright. It might make it awkward afterward when I wipe the floor with you."

A growl started from the back of his throat. "Just fight."

I raised an eyebrow. "I'm waiting on you to make a move, buddy. Or did you want me to just knock you to the ground and get it over with?"

He snarled and rushed at me. Aside from his increased speed, his size and long strides allowed him to close the distance between us in a second. I let him get within grabbing distance and then stepped to the side. He ran past me and braked to a stop. He turned to me, confused. I smiled. His face turned dark in anger. He raised an arm and ran back to me. I waited again until he was close enough, but before his fingers

could reach me I ducked and punched him in the stomach. He let out a howl of pain. Bear stomachs were sensitive, and they especially didn't like to be punched there. Not that other shifters did, but I'd noticed bears hated it more than others.

Razor-sharp claws appeared at the ends of his fingertips as he partially shifted. I narrowed my eyes. My fingernails were no match against his claws, but my daggers were. I reached behind me and unsheathed both of my trusty daggers. I waited in place for him to make the first move. He studied me and lumbered toward me, slashing at me when he got close enough. I twisted, narrowly dodging his giant paws, and plunged my dagger at him. He turned at the last second, avoiding my blow. He countered with the other claw. I blocked him with a dagger. He pushed against me, and I yielded. I might have more strength than the average witch, but I wasn't a fool to think I was a match against a bear shifter.

We separated, and I bounced on my toes, watching for weaknesses. We parried back and forth for a bit. I noticed he seemed to be more defensive of his stomach after I'd punched him. I aimed my dagger toward him with my right hand, and he blocked me with two claws. I used my left hand to drive my dagger into his stomach. He let out a howl of rage and pain. I danced back before he could shred me. I twisted around him and stabbed him in his sides, and he threw his head back. I jumped on his back and wrapped my arm around his neck, my dagger at his throat. "Yield."

He tried to shake me off, bending over to flip me over. I allowed myself to flip over, landing on my feet and sliding under his defense to jump up and hold my dagger at his throat again. "Yield."

His claws rushed at me. I could have stopped him with an incantation, but I refused to use magic. I would show him this half-witch was more skilled at fighting than he was. I didn't need my magic to win. I would show everybody.

His eyes were molten fury.

"Yield," I said one last time.

"I yield," he finally said.

I sheathed my daggers and offered him my hand. To my surprise, he actually shook it after shifting back to a human hand. I turned to the bleachers and surveyed the crowd. "Who's next?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I had to fight over a dozen supernaturals before Leon stepped in and said he was satisfied. I had just beaten a witch when he interrupted. Her combat spells didn't make it past my defensive hexes, and I defeated her physically. I hadn't used magic in any of my battles, but when I'd offered the witch my hand to shake, she cursed at me and walked away. I raised an eyebrow. And people wondered why I didn't get along with fellow witches.

Leon and Rafael walked over to me. I pushed my hair out of my face. I rearranged the bobby pins so that they held back my hair.

"That was impressive," Leon said. He surveyed my sweat-drenched body.

I looked down. My crop top clung to my body and was translucent. Good thing I had worn a nice bra. Rafael's eyes sparkled at me despite his neutral expression.

Leon handed me the revised contract and a pen. Someone must have delivered it to him at some point during my fights.

I skimmed through it. I went to the bleachers and started making changes. I struck through some items and added a few of my own amendments.

"What are you doing?" Leon asked.

I looked up at him. "You don't expect me to sign the first contract you hand me, do you?"

His expression was stunned. He blinked. "You do realize that *we* are offering *you* a chance not to be locked up, right? And this is the second contract. We amended the first."

"I'm offering you my services." I shrugged and returned to correcting the terms of the contract.

I could practically feel the cat trembling to pounce on me. I bit my lip to avoid smiling. Working for the Alliance might turn out to be fun after all.

It took time to go through the contract. While we had agreed on the general term of two years, there were plenty of smaller details to negotiate. I wanted full immunity from any and all crimes I had committed prior to my arrest, but Leon didn't want to give me a blanket pardon without me listing those crimes. This was just one of the things that had caused negotiations to come to a standstill, but Rafael managed to keep us moving. He had a talent for getting people

to do what he wanted. I understood why they had assigned him to get close to me — his charm was irresistible for everyone.

After I was done with the changes, I handed Leon the revised contract. With a raised eyebrow, he browsed through them. He narrowed his eyes at some parts, but didn't say anything to the contrary. He left the floor. I wondered if the legal team would allow my changes to stand.

I leaned back in my seat, closing my eyes and allowing myself to relax for the first time since my arrest. I heard Rafael walk away. I allowed myself to float away from everything, emptying my mind of all thought. I heard light footsteps walking back. Opening my eyes and leaning forward, I saw Rafael holding two bottles of water. He tucked one under his arm and cracked opened the bottle cap of the other. He handed it to me.

"Thanks." I wrapped my lips around it and drank. It was cold and refreshing.

Rafael sat next to me. He was close enough that his thigh brushed mine. All the agents I had fought against had left to recover. Rafael and I were all alone in the giant room.

"Leon was right — that was certainly impressive," he said after a few moments of silence.

I shrugged. It may have seemed impressive to them, but it was what I had trained for my entire life.

"After seeing that, I can't help but wonder why you allowed yourself to get hurt the other night." He was referring to that night at the vampire lounge when Ethan got the best of me.

I lowered my head and stared at my feet. "I needed to feel pain."

"Why?" It seemed important that I answer him.

I glanced up at him. Could I tell him the truth? I decided to take the plunge. "I was a little emotional at seeing you there. I didn't like what I was feeling, so I distracted myself by feeling something else."

"You repress your emotions." A thoughtful expression crossed his face.

I shrugged again. "I can compartmentalize them most of the time, but I slipped that day. I needed another outlet."

"I'm really sorry that I caused you pain."

"You didn't." I was embarrassed. I lowered my eyes to look at the floor again. This was awkward.

He grabbed my left hand, making me look up at him. "I just need you to know that I didn't sleep with you for the job. I had an amazing time with you. But I had to report in." A rueful smile played on his lips.

"Leon said something about you not being a completely straight-shooter as an agent. What did he mean? Why can't he suspend you?"

Rafael raised his hand and ran it through his hair. "It's a little complicated."

"More complicated than this?" I took another sip of water. "Are you some sort of fae royalty? Is the Alliance stuck with you, so you go out and do what you want and they keep having to make excuses?"

He snorted. "No, thankfully. I'm not royal or even noble. I'm middle-class fae."

I raised an eyebrow. Middle-class fae still made the rest of us look like paupers."

He shook his head. "No, really."

"How come Leon didn't make me fight you?"

"I guess he doesn't consider me one of the best." Rafael's tone was light. "Or maybe he thought it would be too personal."

"Maybe he thought I'd let you win."

"Would you have done that? I don't imagine you would." Rafael grinned.

I put away the water bottle and got to my feet. I reached my hand to Rafael. "Come on, let's go."

The expression on his face was a mixture of amusement and bewilderment. He placed his hand in mine and I pulled him up. I tugged him toward the center of the room.

We faced each other. I let go of his hand.

His eyes sparkled. "This is payback for everything, isn't it?"

"It may make me feel slightly better after beating you," I admitted.

He smiled crookedly. "I guess I deserve that. Thing is, you won't beat me."

"We'll see about that." I moved back, out of reach. "Blood, bone, or yield?"

Rafael thought for a moment. "I don't want to deal with any more blood tonight, and I'd prefer to keep your bones intact. On the ground and yield."

That meant I'd have to change my approach. I'd have to use some judo moves to get him on the floor. I loosened the muscles in my shoulders. "Do you need to warm up?"

Rafael shook his head. I watched him carefully, and he allowed a small smile to spread across his face. "Ladies first."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm number three on the Alliance's most-wanted list. What's your rank?"

"They don't want me at all," he laughed.

I decided to take advantage of his politeness and dashed toward him. He stood his ground until the last second and then ducked my punch. I pivoted and delivered an uppercut with my right hand. I connected with his body, but he didn't react. He danced on his feet, trying to tire me out. He rained down blows on me in a

choreographed manner. There was something familiar about his technique. It reminded me of my own training.

"Seriously, who are you?" I ducked a blow.

"You know who I am."

The more he moved, the more I noticed that his fighting style was different than that of the other Alliance agents. From the way they had moved, I could see the training they had. It made their motions predictable. Rafael, on the other hand, was different in his combat, yet there was a familiarity to his movements. We kept fighting, and when he dodged a move of mine, I realized who he reminded me of: Basuki.

Basuki was a former instructor of mine. He was an elite warrior. My mother had begged him to take me on, and he refused initially because I was a half-witch girl. He didn't think I was worth his time, but I'd made him change his mind. It had cost my mother a lot of time, a hefty price, and many favors to get me to train with him. There was no way that even a middle-class fae would have gotten training with Basuki.

But now that I saw it, I began recognizing Rafael's patterns. I had trained with Basuki for six months. I still practiced his moves in my training rituals.

The next time Rafael executed a move that I knew was Basuki's, I instantly got him. He fell to the ground, and I straddled him. I pinned his arms above him with one hand and set a dagger against his neck. He swallowed, and his Adam's apple grazed the edge of my blade. My hair fell forward and brushed against his nose. It cocooned us from the rest of the world. His eyes burned into mine.

"You're hiding secrets about who you are," I whispered. I didn't mind. Much. He was entitled to his secrets as long as he didn't pry into mine.

Rafael opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Leon's voice sounded behind us. "Haven't you had enough?" We both turned to the shifter. He had a strange expression on his face. The contract was in his hand.

I let go of Rafael's wrists, withdrew my dagger, and swung a leg over him, getting to my feet. He pushed me, and I fell to the ground. Rafael had me face-first on the floor, an arm around my neck and his other hand holding my wrists behind me. His weight crushed my body. His voice tickled my ear. "You got me on the ground, but I didn't yield."

I allowed a small smile to spread across my face. He had surprised me.

"Yield," he said. I could feel the warmth of his body against me.

In the past, Basuki had tried a similar trick. He hadn't reckoned with the resilience of a young half-witch. I used the same self-defense

move I had years ago. I struck Rafael with the back of my head, hearing a grunt of pain as I made contact with his nose. His arms loosened, and I bucked my body. I twisted around. His hands gripped his nose. I shoved him to the ground, my knees holding him still.

“No.” I smiled at him. "*You* yield."

The fae laughed. “I yield, I yield.”

I shifted myself off his body. His smile was all innocence. Leon still waited; he looked bored. I got to my feet and padded over to him and read through the pages. They had agreed to all my changes. I initialed each page and signed the contract.

For the next two years, I was officially a consultant for the Alliance.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I stood outside the Alliance headquarters. *Fire and brimstone*. Of all the ways I thought tonight would end, this hadn't been one of them.

"I'll take you back home." Rafael carried his bloodied jacket over his arms.

I wrinkled my nose. "I can't believe you're taking that thing."

"I can't burn it in the office," he said. "Besides, you needed to see it so you could buy me a new one."

We walked toward his car. I stole a glance at him. "You had a decent good-cop, bad-cop routine in there with Leon. You guys practice it much?"

He rolled his shoulders in a shrug. "I don't work much with him. He's a good guy, though."

"Oh?" I invited him to continue. I was still trying to figure out what Rafael's role was in the whole organization. I knew he was more than he had led me to believe.

He opened the car door for me.

I raised an eyebrow at the gesture. "My hands don't hurt that much after beating you to a pulp."

Rafael laughed. He waited until I got in to close the door and walk around to his side of the car.

"Why did you sign with us?" Rafael asked me once he was in the car.

"Did I have any other option?" I couldn't share the real reason with him. Not yet.

He just looked at me and didn't respond. We pulled out of the Alliance headquarters' parking lot and headed down the street. I allowed myself a half-smile. At least he was aware that it had been my choice to agree to consult for the Alliance. He and I both knew that I'd had several opportunities to escape since the moment he had opened the back door of the lounge. "I have my reasons."

"Is it going to be strange for you to no longer be the Supernatural Shadow?" Rafael asked me.

"No, not really. But I'm going to miss the money," I reflected. "And the challenge."

"Is that why you did it? For the money and the challenge?"

"Sure. I got paid to set my own routine and I delivered results. I was good at my job and very much in demand." I'd have to go to

Javier and have him remove me from the roster at the bounty office. He was going to be upset; he hated losing good bounty hunters. The others would love it because it meant more work for them, especially Luke and Tahani.

"We'll try to keep you busy at the Alliance," Rafael joked.

"You'd better. Noor wasn't exaggerating when she said I was a workaholic. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I didn't have something keeping me busy. I'm not a vacation kind of woman."

Rafael raised an eyebrow. "And yet only hours ago you told Leon you were ready for a vacation."

"It would drive me insane." I smirked. "But now I only have to work with you for two years."

Part of the reason I kept myself busy all the time was so that the paranoid thoughts constantly plaguing my mind would keep away. I used my job to direct the negative energy elsewhere. If I didn't have anything to do, I'd have to start the hunt for my mother again, and I wasn't sure I was ready to go back down that path.

When I was fifteen, I had returned home and there was no sign of her. I had searched, but hadn't been able to find her. I sent out a missing person's report, even put up flyers, but nothing was successful. I seemed to be able to locate everyone except for my own mother, the only person I was truly interested in tracking down. It drove me crazy that I couldn't locate her. There was a strange kind of irony in that. I had perfected my skills in locating complete strangers, but I couldn't even locate the most important person to me: my own flesh and blood.

"Where did you go?" Rafael said, bringing me back to the present. He gave me a funny look.

"Just thinking about how different my life is going to be now."

"Hopefully it will be an easy transition. There are good people in the Alliance."

"Do you enjoy it?" I genuinely wanted to know.

He thought about his answer before he gave it. "It is interesting work. A lot of people think of us as the bad guys, which isn't too great, but I believe the work we do is important. As a community, we're fractured. We have too many forces driving us apart when we could be stronger together. Attempts to heal those rifts keep failing. I view the agency as the one place where supernaturals can coexist, and I hope that the acceptance within the Alliance will extend to our supernatural society. Supernaturals of all kinds should put aside their prejudices and work together for a better future."

I didn't say anything in response.

"What?" he asked.

"Fire and brimstone." I shook my head. "You're a faithful."

He ducked his head, focusing on the road. I could tell he was embarrassed. "So what if I am?"

"I just hadn't expected it. I'm more of a cynic myself." It reminded me too much of Sebastian and his beliefs that humans should be exposed to supernaturals. Even Noor, with her outward positivity and an angel mother and demon father who were still together to this day, didn't have much faith in all supernaturals getting along. Her mixed heritage made her an outcast, and she didn't belong in either world. The demons didn't want her, and the angels didn't accept her, either. We were both outsiders, and so I had never seen the other side. “I don’t view it that way at all.”

"What made you lose faith in the community?" Rafael asked me.

"The way people treated me." It was true that my mother had raised me to be paranoid of supernaturals, but growing up I had faced the scorn of coven members and experienced the disdain of shifters. Other supernaturals didn't treat me much better. Apart from Ethan's treatment of me a few nights ago, the vampires adamantly denied my relationship with Sebastian. Not all of the supernaturals I came across were rude to me, but the general atmosphere of tension was enough to make me realize that supernaturals just didn't want to get along.

Rafael reached out with his right hand and wrapped it around mine.

"What does this mean?" I looked down at our entwined fingers.

"You weren't just a job to me." He squeezed my hand.

I glanced at him, and the desire in his eyes made me shift in my seat. "Are you trying to get invited to my bed again? Isn’t that against the rules now that I’m your coworker?” My tone was light, but I was practically holding my breath.

“The Alliance doesn’t care who its employees sleep with, even if they were former assassins.”

“And you’re not worried about your throat being slit in your sleep?”

He chuckled. “You can slit my throat any time. I don’t need to be asleep for you to get it done.”

I thought about it. He’d acknowledged my ability to kill him and didn’t fear it. This was new. It was tempting.

“I won't give you a chance to rifle through my things this time,” I warned him. “It would have to be your place so I can snoop through your drawers."

"How soon do you want to make it happen?" His voice was light.

I hid a smile. "I don't think I can start working at the Alliance with this uneven balance." My thumb lightly stroked the back of his hand.

He took his eyes off the road and snuck a glance at me. The heat in his gaze could have set me on fire.

Fire and brimstone, I was zapped. I shifted in my seat.

Rafael grinned. "In that case, do you mind if we change our destination and head back to my place? It should set us up on an even footing."

There was no reason not to. He knew my secret now. I might as well have fun.

I gave him a smile. This time it reached my eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I walked into my apartment to see Noor sitting at the table, eating breakfast. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she said. She took in my outfit. "Oh, still in yesterday's clothes. Is this the walk of shame? Is that loved-up hair?"

"Yes." I grinned at her.

She let out a squeal and slammed a palm against the table. In her excitement, she had hit the table too hard and some cereal jumped out of the bowl. "Come over here and tell me all about it." She used her foot to push the chair across from her away from the table, inviting me to sit.

I walked over and joined her.

"What happened? Was it Rafael? It was, wasn't it? I can't imagine you'd move on to another guy so soon. How did you guys hook up again?" Noor barely gave me time to answer her.

I laughed.

"Answer me," she demanded.

"Give me a chance and I will. First, I went to the vampire lounge, found my target, killed him, and then Rafael arrested me."

Noor's jaw dropped open. She squealed again. "There were cuffs used? Tell me more."

I laughed. "For the arrest. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"I enjoy the gutter. It's the demonic side of me." She pouted. "You guys are boring. Go on, what happened next?" Noor was practically clawing for me to continue.

"He took me to the Alliance headquarters, where they threatened to lock me up unless I agreed to work for them. I figured you'd miss me too much if I went to jail, so I decided to cut a deal. I added a clause that said Rafael had to pleasure me whenever I requested it, and I went over to his place to test it out. And that was my night."

Noor couldn't speak for a full minute.

I swiped her bowl of cereal and ate a spoonful. I made a face; she always put too much sugar in it.

She blinked at me, not smiling anymore. "What?"

I gave her a shrug. "Busy night."

"You work for the Alliance now?"

I pointed the spoon at her. "I told you it was a bad idea for me to see Rafael. I was trying to avoid him, and now I'm working for them."

"What does this mean?"

"It means that I'm no longer in the game. No bounties. No assassinations."

"Just like that?" She didn't sound convinced.

"Just like that," I affirmed.

As if just realizing I had swiped her breakfast, she reached for the bowl. I moved it out of her reach and continued eating the cereal.

She crossed her arms and set them on the table. She leaned forward. "I wasn't hungry anyway."

I finished the last spoonful of cereal and pushed away the bowl of sugary milk.

"Did you really put in that clause?" she asked in a hushed voice, her blue eyes wide.

I started laughing so hard the cereal threatened to come back up.

"It's not funny. I can totally see you doing that. Tell me you wouldn't do that," Noor huffed. "Besides, doesn't the Alliance have rules against fraternization?"

"He says they don't." I shrugged. "We were too busy doing other things to discuss that."

She grinned at me. "Do you want to share details?"

"Not at the moment." I wondered if I should tell her that Rafael had been assigned to me from the start. I decided against it. She was already hurt about the Leroy incident.

A look of disappointment crossed her face. "Boo. You should be kind to your friends who aren't getting any."

"I'm surprised you haven't asked me for something yet."

"What's that?"

"I thought you'd ask how soon I could hook you up with an Alliance agent."

"Oh, that's right," she drawled. She twirled a long strand of her black-and-blonde hair around her finger. "You're going to have access to a whole new group of guys. Be a friend and set me up on some awesome dates."

"I'll try."

"When do you start?" Noor asked me.

"Today." I pulled out my phone and glanced at the time. "I'm actually running late. I have to take a shower."

Noor shook her head, a smile on her lips.

"What?" I asked her.

"The Supernatural Shadow is working at the Alliance. It's just funny."

I couldn't disagree with her. "I'm acting as a consultant."

Noor laughed. "This is going to be amazing. I can't wait to hear what they get you up to. You can share details, right?"

I shrugged. "They didn't tell me I couldn't."

Noor clapped. "Fantastic! This might be even more fun than hearing your bounty and assassination stories. The other ones always ended one of two ways: captured or dead."

"Glad to be of use to you." My lips twisted as I stood up from the table. "Now I have to get ready and get going or I *will* be late, and who knows how they'll react to that?"

Chapter Thirty

Leon had requested I start at the Alliance as soon as possible, so that meant bright and early the morning after I'd been arrested. When I got to the headquarters, Rafael was waiting for me at the front door. He gave me a crooked smile. "Are you ready for your first day, Agent?"

"I'm not an agent, I'm a consultant," I told him as he walked me over to the elevator.

"Aren't I entitled to a little fantasy?"

"Is that one of yours?" I pressed the elevator button. We were the only ones waiting. I wondered what time everyone else showed up for work.

"We've already engaged in several of mine." He leaned in to whisper into my ear, his breath tickling my neck. "The first one was seducing the most-wanted assassin in Europe. The second was arresting her for criminal behavior and then taking her back home to teach her a lesson."

I laughed. "Is that what happened? Personally, I thought I taught you a few things, or did you forget the handcuffs?"

Rafael grinned. "You can teach me lessons any time."

The elevator doors opened. Rafael placed his hand on the small of my back, and we stepped in. I counted the seconds as the elevator doors closed and then swiftly turned on him, pinning him to the wall. I held his wrists above his head with one hand and reached behind my back with the other for my dagger. His moss-green eyes sparkled as he laughed at me. I silenced him with a forceful kiss. His tongue darted into my mouth, probing. I broke off our kiss suddenly, leaving him wanting more. He waited to see what I would do next.

I raised my dagger and trailed the edge of my blade down his delicate features and along his masculine jaw. The tip of the dagger pressed lightly under his chin. I watched his Adam's apple shake. He was trying to contain his laughter. It seemed my fae lover enjoyed playing with sharp objects, too.

"The next time you're in my bed, I'm going to teach you a lesson in blades," I promised him.

"I look forward to it."

I glanced above my head and nodded to the upper corner of the elevator. "We just gave the security men a good show."

Rafael let out a loud laugh and grabbed me around the waist. He

kissed my mouth roughly. I was careful not to nip him with my dagger. We broke apart as the elevator door pinged. I smoothly returned my dagger to its place and ran my fingers through my curls.

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped outside.

We were back on the sixth floor. It resembled the seventh, but unlike on the seventh floor, these cubicles were filled with people. Supernaturals of all kinds typed on computers or talked on the phone. I saw a few pointed ears — other fae. From the way their noses rose as we walked past, I noticed a few shifters, too. The rest appeared to be witches and wizards.

Rafael led me to an office and we stepped inside. Leon was standing at a window with his back to us. The office was spacious. There was a large desk with a couple chairs across from it. In the corner of the office was a small, circular table with four chairs surrounding it. A bowl of fruit sat on the tabletop, accompanied by a large glass pitcher of water and some drinking glasses.

Leon turned around at our entrance. "Good, you're right on time. Have a seat."

Rafael waited for me to sit before he took the seat across from me. Leon stayed where he was with the window to his back.

Leon studied me, his golden eyes intent. "In an ordinary situation we would insist on an ankle bracelet to track you, but because Rafael vouched for you we've decided to forgo that. Besides, it makes things awkward with the way you two are carrying on."

I frowned at Rafael, and he shook his head minutely.

"I can smell your arousal," Leon said bluntly. "Your scents are all over each other. Maybe next time avoid pawing each other in the elevator?"

“Jealous?” I arched an eyebrow. I studied the shifter. “Are you seeing anyone? My roommate is looking for an Alliance agent to date. She said she wanted a hot one, but you’ll do.”

Rafael covered his mouth and coughed, clearly trying to cover up his laughter, but to no avail. His body shook with silent laughter. I grinned.

Leon waited until we were able to compose ourselves. He ignored my question. I’d have to ask Rafael about his relationship status later. Once Rafael had stopped laughing, the Alliance agent began. "As stated in the contract, we'll use your services." He coughed and continued, "You'll get a regular salary to cover your living expenses. I'm sure it's modest compared to what you were earning from your criminal endeavors and freelance activities. You're not to take on any bounty hunter jobs or assassinations, independently or with another organization of any kind. Failure of compliance will result in termination of your services and negation of your contract. We would

transfer you directly to Arkanez Prison for Supernatural Criminals. Any questions?"

I shook my head. Most of that had been covered in the contract.

"Another thing," Leon said. "We don't kill at the Alliance."

"If we can help it," Rafael muttered.

"None of that," Leon reprimanded Rafael before turning to face me once more. "If you kill someone, you would be in violation of your contract, and again—"

"You will transfer me to prison," I completed his sentence.

"You're a fast learner." He gave me an approving nod.

"Don't patronize me." There was a reason I had insisted that they add a self-defense clause to the contract. In their hurry to get me to sign on with them, they had failed to state the definition of self-defense and what fell under it.

I refused to be made a victim because of stupid rules and regulations. Sometimes the only way out of a situation was to kill. And I would rather kill than be killed.

Leon moved over to us and sat in his chair at the desk. He leaned back. "Anyway, now that's out of the way, I can assign you to your first task."

My ears perked up. I was curious to see what task the Alliance would give a former bounty hunter and assassin. What could I do that their agents hadn't been able to? Well, I was about to find out.

Chapter Thirty-One

I was pretty sure the task Leon was about to assign me was the reason he had been so eager to get me to sign on in the first place. He placed a hand on a manila folder in front of him. "Your first job is to track a vampire that has evaded us for too long."

Strange. I knew I was an excellent bounty hunter, but he could have outsourced this job instead of assigning me to it. I frowned. "Why don't you ask the vampires?"

"We did. They claim not to know where he is."

The vampires always knew where everyone was. "What about his Master?"

"His Master hasn't been able to locate him for us. In any case, we believe you have the skills to locate him. You have an excellent reputation as a bounty hunter."

I raised an eyebrow. Was this it? Was this why Leon wanted me to work for the Alliance? He could have hired me at Javier's office. There would be no guarantee that I would have taken on the job, of course, but it would have been less of a headache for him than trying to justify paying me two years' salary instead of locking me up. Then again, I doubted the Alliance had to justify anything to anyone. The lack of supervision and regulatory laws were part of the reason they were so distrusted in the supernatural community. Unless they were needed, of course.

"Yes, I had your records sent over and took the liberty of informing your former boss that you're not to take on any more bounty jobs," Leon confirmed. "We need you to get the vampire alive."

"What's he done?" I was curious to see what had made the Alliance so antsy.

"He's threatening to expose us all."

"The Alliance?" I asked.

"The supernatural world." Leon's lips pressed together.

This was the reason there was increased chatter about supernaturals being revealed to humans. Mateu was going to be so happy when I gave him this piece of news. I paused as I tried to remember if this fell under the non-disclosure amendment in the contract. I would have to be very careful about what I shared with the gargoyle in the future.

"The vampires won't help with that?" I said. "If we're exposed, it

will affect them, too."

"We believe they're cooperating to the best of their abilities, but still, no one's found him. We have assurances from his Master that he's made attempts to reach the target, but he hasn't responded."

I whistled. Vampire protocol was that if a Master summoned you, you responded immediately or risk being shunned. If a vampire was shunned, then the entire vampire community cut ties with him and he was declared an exile. After being declared an exile, it was nearly impossible to find any type of success without the aid of other vampires. There was a reason for the vampire hierarchy, and one would be hard-pressed to find any vampires that lived in complete isolation from other vampires. Due to their long lives, they needed each other for survival. If humans found out about a vampire and his or her location, it was effectively a death sentence. The vampire community made sure to keep their world secret at all costs. Without the community's protection, an exiled vampire wouldn't last very long.

"What's the timeline? When do you need him by?" I asked Leon.

"As soon as possible. The chatter is getting louder that this event is happening sooner rather than later." His voice was grim.

"Can I use my usual sources for information?" I needed to know if I could get Ibrahim and Mateu's help on this. Or Hubert, if I needed him.

"Yes, and you will have access to the Alliance's full resources. Let Rafael know what you need, and he'll see to it that you get it."

"Oh, he's good at attending to my needs."

Rafael swallowed a laugh. Leon glowered.

I smiled. In reality, I didn't have much faith in their resources, but I was curious about what they had nonetheless. "Okay, who's my target?"

Leon slid the manila folder across the desk to me.

I picked it up and flipped it open. I looked down at the face of my target. At first I was shocked, but then I started laughing.

Rafael and Leon exchanged looks.

"This is a joke, right? You're hazing me." I pushed the manila folder away. "Good one. You nearly got me going with the whole 'threatening to expose the supernatural world' thing."

"It's not a joke," Leon said. His eyebrows were knit together.

My laughter died as I looked between the two of them. They were serious.

Rafael gave a tiny shake of his head. "This isn't a joke, Aisha. We need you to find him."

"Why do you think it's a joke?" Leon asked me.

"Because this guy"—I pointed at the folder—"is dead."

There was a sharp hiss of breath from Leon before he demanded,

"How do you know that?"

"Are you sure?" Rafael leaned toward me.

"Yes." I looked at them both before I answered. "Because I killed him myself."

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Explain," Leon demanded, leaning forward in his chair. "What do you mean you killed him?"

"It's Sebastian." I pointed at the photograph. It showed a handsome vampire with dirty blond hair and blue eyes. He had a smug smile on his face. He wore glasses even though he didn't need them, but he believed they made him look more intellectual. It was a pity that the illusion shattered whenever he opened his mouth. "He's my ex-boyfriend."

"Do you have a habit of killing your ex-boyfriends?" Rafael quipped, eyebrows raised.

I gave him a sharp smile. "Only the ones that irritate me."

"When did you kill him?" Leon asked with a frown. He was all business.

"A year and three months ago." I'd killed him on our anniversary; I didn't realize how much time had passed.

"Turn to the next few pages." Leon leaned back in his chair again, but this time he wasn't relaxed. He steepled his fingers and pressed them to his lips as he waited for me to read the documents in front of me.

I flipped through and saw CCTV photos of Sebastian. The photos were grainy, but the man in the photos was unmistakably Sebastian. I inhaled sharply as I saw the dates on the photographs; they were as recent as three months ago.

"He's alive?" The words came out in a whisper. That was impossible — Sebastian couldn't be alive. I had killed him. I glanced up at Leon.

He nodded grimly. "Yes."

Sebastian was dead. I had made sure of that. There was no way for him to be walking around Barcelona, but the photographs showed that he was.

I lifted the surveillance photos with my left hand. "Could these be fabricated?"

"No, there's too much evidence showing that he's active. Other than photographs, there have been two live sightings, but the agents didn't have time to get to him. He slipped through their fingers."

"How did you kill him?" Rafael asked me. "Did you tear out his heart?"

"No, I dumped him in the sea. I made sure he wasn't breathing and then dumped him overboard," I said almost distractedly. I sifted through more surveillance photos, trying to identify where they had been taken. All of them contained unfamiliar backgrounds, but I recognized Barcelona regardless. The idiot hadn't even bothered moving to a different city. He had been under my nose this entire time. His sheer arrogance made me want to scream.

A year and three months ago, Sebastian had told me he wanted to go on a boat ride for our anniversary. We rented a boat for the day and set out. It had been a beautiful morning with a slight breeze. I packed a few bottles of wine so Sebastian could get drunk off my blood. What he hadn't known was that I had poisoned each bottle before I drank it. Yes, I poisoned myself in order to kill my ex-boyfriend. I drank an antidote after he had sipped my blood.

I waited until he passed out and then slipped him overboard. I couldn't weigh him down with rocks; there had been no way to bring them on board without it looking suspicious.

"What did he do?" Rafael asked. "Why did you kill him?"

"Why do you want to know? Want to avoid his mistake?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Genuinely curious," he said.

I gnawed my lower lip. I didn't know where to start. "Everything was great when we first got together. He was a thoughtful partner and we got along great. However, over the time I knew him he grew increasingly erratic. He talked about exposing supernaturals even then. At first I thought it was just the usual complaints, didn't think much of it. Then I realized it was something more. I talked to his Master about it, and his Master told me it was nothing, that it was just a phase many vampires went through, but I knew it was more." My voice trailed off as I reflected on the past.

His Master had been upset with me when I confessed to him what I had done to Sebastian. I knew he'd feel their connection sever and send out people to see what had happened. I eliminated the risk of people coming after me by admitting to my part in the murder right away. It was the same thought process that had led Rafael to inform the lounge owner about the dead vampire out back: as long as the vampires knew someone had been held accountable, then their thirst for vengeance was quenched. I had been prepared for a fight, but instead Sebastian's Master agreed to exchange favors. So far, he hadn't called in any yet. I still awaited that day.

"When did you decide to kill him?" Leon pressed.

"When he told me he was going to be the one who would change the world for the better." I paused. "The thing with Sebastian is that his actions come from a good place, but I knew it would just plunge us

all into chaos. At first I didn't believe him, but then he started spreading rumors and recruiting anyone who would listen. He thought that upending our world would help humans. He didn't see that it would only cause more misery and strife in the human world." I stopped again and thought of the implications of Sebastian's existence. I'd tried to kill him once for wanting to reveal us to the humans, and I couldn't let him try again. Sebastian failed to understand that if humans found out about the supernatural community, then the humans would no longer be on top of the food chain. Once they realized that their spot at the top of the pyramid was being threatened, they would come after us holding pitchforks.

"You tried to reason with him?" Leon asked. "Did he identify with any groups with the same beliefs?"

I shook my head. "Several times. But no, he didn't have friends that agreed with him. It wasn't like he was part of a cult. It was actually a point of contention between him and the other vampires. They enjoyed wielding power over humans from behind the scenes. It was their behavior that kept driving him to be more and more outspoken."

I'd hated Sebastian's friends. They were the stereotypical vampires, lording it over those lower than them in the hierarchy. They told Sebastian he could do better than dating a witch, and a half-witch at that. One of his friends made the mistake of saying it within my hearing. A quick hex and a lesson with my blades had resulted in caution from the others. I never forgot, and Sebastian had told me they didn't, either.

There had been affection between Sebastian and me, but I didn't think there had ever been love. I still liked him enough to wish him a painless death, which was why I'd chosen to have him drift off to sleep and then sink down in the most peaceful way. I guess I shouldn't have bothered with all that and just stabbed him in the heart instead.

"Well, he's alive," Leon said.

I looked down at the photograph. "Yes, he is."

Sebastian might not have died the last time, but I was going to make sure he did this time.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Bang. *Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.*

Before I could knock on the door with the hilt of my dagger one more time, it opened and a sleepy-looking vampire glared back at me. "Would you cease that infernal noise?"

I shoved past him and marched to his living room. Ibrahim shut the door and followed me. I spun around. Ibrahim was just wearing pajama bottoms. For an old vampire, he had a solid chest. I couldn't help admiring his physique.

"Did you come over here to check me out? I'm flattered." Ibrahim folded his arms. I noticed it made the muscles in his arms bunch.

"You knew." I pointed at him with the tip of my dagger. "You knew this whole time."

He didn't react.

I knew the vampire knew exactly what I was talking about. "How could you let me go around thinking Sebastian was dead? I came to you first. I came to you out of respect, and I admitted to killing him. You made me jump through hoops after that to make it up to you. I can't believe you used me like that." I shouldn't have been surprised; vampires took advantage of any opportunity they were given. But I wasn't going to tell Ibrahim that I was furious at having been taken advantage of.

"I didn't consider it prudent to inform you of his status." Ibrahim unfolded his arms and lowered himself into his armchair. He crossed one leg over the other.

"So you just let me think he was dead?" I paced back and forth, furious with him.

"You weren't the only one who thought that," Ibrahim said mildly. "Most of Sebastian's acquaintances don't know he's still among us."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" I demanded. "Does that make it okay?"

"I wasn't going to give you the chance to kill my offspring again."

"You know what he did. You know what he intended to do. I had to stop him."

Ibrahim's expression was shuttered. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"You know what he did was wrong," I repeated. I spat the last word at him.

"I have forgiven him," he said.

I shook my head. "I can't believe you hid this from me."

It hit me: the whole time Ibrahim had been helping me, he knew what I was up to, he was keeping tabs on me. He knew I was the Supernatural Shadow. I felt so stupid. I had been played.

My face must have betrayed my thoughts, because he spoke up. "Don't. We are who we are and who we've always been. Don't let things change between us because you know."

"A year and three months. You've known for a year and three months that Sebastian's been walking around Barcelona and you did nothing about it." I couldn't keep the accusatory note out of my voice.

"You're angry at the moment, but you'll understand with time. And hopefully forgive me." Ibrahim tilted his head. "Are you not happy to learn that he's not dead?"

"No! I was happy that I killed him." I stared at him, incredulous. "I just let you know out of courtesy."

"It's unfortunate that you feel that way. I had assumed it would ease your conscience to learn that you hadn't killed someone for once."

I stared at the vampire. He wasn't seriously trying to guilt-trip me, was he? "Are you kidding me? You're just like him. You can't see right from wrong."

Ibrahim raised an eyebrow. "You want to discuss ethics now?"

"The Alliance is looking for him." I stabbed the air with each word I said.

"They're not the only ones."

"The Vampire Council?"

He didn't answer me.

"So it's true. He's really going to do what he promised he would. I can't believe you're colluding with him." I shook my head in disgust.

"I'm not," Ibrahim said.

"You are," I insisted. "You're complicit in what he's doing because you refuse to put a stop to it. You won't talk against him publicly. You created him. You're responsible for him, and you're not living up to your responsibilities."

"Who are you to tell me what my responsibility is?" There was a dangerous undertone to his words. Ibrahim never pulled the Master Vampire card, but I could tell he was about to.

But I refused to be intimidated by him. "Did you listen to the list of people who are looking for him? They all want to stop him. He’s going to turn our entire world upside down. You seem to be the only one who doesn't want him found or stopped."

We glared at each other. Ibrahim remained silent.

"Unless that *is* what you want." That had to be it. That was the only

reason that Ibrahim wasn't moving to stop Sebastian.

Ibrahim shook his head and sighed. "No, I don't believe what he's doing is right. I called him, but he is not heeding my call."

Belatedly, I recalled what Leon had shared with me before he'd handed me the manila folder. Sebastian's Master had been searching for him, but Sebastian hadn't responded.

I remembered I had something else to be angry at him for. "Why did you tell Diego where I was?"

Ibrahim arched an eyebrow at my topic change. "He asked me if I knew you."

"He didn't know my name."

Ibrahim pursed his lips. "True, but he asked if I knew you, and I did. Would you have me hide this fact from the most powerful shifter in the city?"

"What did he say he wanted me for?" I needed to know if Ibrahim had given me up to die.

"He wanted to know if I knew who may have waylaid a few of his shifters. He suspected the Supernatural Shadow and wanted to meet him."

"Even if it meant my death?"

"He assured me he wasn't going to kill you. He just wanted to come to an understanding. I told him I was rather fond of you. I extracted a promise that he wasn't to hurt you when he found you."

The vampire may have been the reason Diego saved my life. He wouldn't have wanted the vampire to think he had harmed me. It was less trouble to drop me at my apartment door, and he had sent me a message by doing the same.

"Do you know where I live?" I had moved away from the apartment I shared with Sebastian after that night on the boat. I didn't think the vampire knew where I currently lived.

"No. Do you want to give me your address?" Ibrahim asked me.

I shook my head.

"How did you find out about Sebastian?" he asked.

"I'm not in a sharing mood at the moment." I crossed my arms over my chest. I was too angry at him for keeping the news from me. He had kept this big secret from me, and it may be childish, but I didn't want to reveal my part in the Alliance. I tapped my dagger against my arm.

The vampire didn't react. "I'm presuming someone's asked you to locate him. If anyone can find Sebastian, it's you."

"Will you help me?"

Ibrahim shook his head. "I've done all I can. Beyond that, I cannot betray my kind."

"You risk the exposure of our world for a vampire that won't heed

your call." I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice. "By that, you doom us all. "

"I'm counting on you to prevent that from happening."

Ibrahim wouldn't help me, but he wanted someone else do to the dirty work for everyone. Typical selfish vampire, refusing to help but wanting the benefits.

"You're an excellent bounty hunter," he assured me. "Your skills will determine whether we remain safe or become exposed to the world."

No pressure.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I didn't trust the vampire anymore. I thought Ibrahim and I had a solid friendship, but it seemed that he valued his self-interest more. Ibrahim had kept a vital piece of information from me and wouldn't supply me with the usual information that I needed now. He wouldn't help me find Sebastian. I'd have to do it without his support. That meant I was going to find out how good the resources at the Alliance were.

As I left the vampire's home, I started thinking of my next step.

Just like my tactic for finding Donnie the demon, I knew the key to tracking people was to figure out their habits. I had been with Sebastian for one year before I killed him, and we had lived together for four months. Before we lived together, he had explained several times how unjust the current supernatural situation was. It wasn't until I moved in with him that I saw how deep his convictions were and how serious his obsessive compulsions.

He believed it wasn't right that humans didn't know about supernaturals, citing the many benefits we could provide to the human population. Sebastian harped on how supernaturals could make the world a better place. He argued that we could eradicate diseases using magic, and we could help address social problems and open up many opportunities. He failed to see that if diseases were eradicated, global mortality rates would decrease, and the world has a finite pool of resources. With lower mortality rates, the competition for resources would increase exponentially. It would be a disaster.

The second reason I disagreed with Sebastian was because I knew humans' history. When humans didn't understand something, they immediately feared it. If humans found out about us, they would kill us because they didn't trust us or they wanted our talents for themselves. Unable to understand or harness our abilities, they'd kill us out of envy and greed. Humans destroy that which they covet.

Sebastian had tried many times to get me on board with his beliefs. He called me pessimistic, but I thought I was simply pragmatic. I couldn't buy into the idealistic future he portrayed.

The more I walked, the more memories came to my mind. We used to go on walks. He enjoyed the movies, particularly the theater in La Barceloneta. It was a quiet, outdated movie theater where they played films in English. I decided to check there first.

The beach was less busy in September, but there were still people

trying to catch a few moments of sunshine. I passed by artists creating fantastical sand works. One man had created a dragon out of sand and lit a real fire at its mouth. I smiled at a little boy who was awestruck by the work of art.

I took a left, crossing the road, and entered the neighborhood where the cinema was located. Memories came flooding back to me — memories that I had buried as deep as I thought his body had sunk a year and three months ago. I wondered if Sebastian had returned to the cinema since then. I knew I hadn't.

A newspaper stand reminded me that Sebastian loved to catch up on the news, especially the *Continental Times*. His favorite reporter was Charlie something-or-other. Sebastian would read his columns religiously and talk about how this journalist was the most awake reporter working today. I put a coin in the newsletter stand and took out a paper. I combed it for a byline starting with Charlie. On the third page, I finally found him: Charlie Gale.

He had a regular column that Sebastian would always echo. Sebastian respected journalists and their quest for truth. I thought he'd even wanted to be one. It was worth checking out if there was a connection between Sebastian and Charlie Gale that would lead anywhere.

I kept walking around the area. It was a quiet neighborhood. There were only a few people outside, but the place was still active, even for September. Mothers pushed their children in strollers, couples young and old sat on benches and enjoyed each other's company, vendors tried selling their trinkets to passing tourists. I went to the theater and left a note where he was sure to see it. I ransacked my mind for other possible places that Sebastian may have returned to. I would have to pass by his old home and see if he had vacated it. There was also a place that he had always wanted to live but had been too lazy to move to. It would be risky for him to move there now, since I knew of his desire to live there, but he might have done it anyways if he thought I believed he was dead. The Alliance was going to send me a list of the areas where Sebastian had been sighted to help narrow down his location.

The sun was beginning to set in the sky and I circled back to El Born and messaged Noor. Sometimes what I needed was someone to bounce ideas off of in order to figure out what to do next. We agreed to meet at the apartment.

The apartment was still empty when I showed up. I poured myself a glass of orange juice and drank as I waited for Noor to show up. She arrived only a few minutes after me.

"Sorry, sorry, a client with an infection showed up as I was leaving." Noor slid onto the chair at the table.

"Please, don't tell me the details." I made a face. I may be able to cut out a heart without feeling squeamish, but I hated hearing about the random infections Noor's customers got due to their lack of hygiene.

"I won't. This was a particularly gross one." She gave me a half-shrug. "So why did you want to meet? Are you going to tell me all about your Alliance meeting? Are you allowed to tell me?"

I took a deep breath. "Sebastian's alive."

Noor blinked. She sat there shell-shocked for a few moments. "He's what? He can't be. This whole time? Are you sure? Of course you're sure, or you wouldn't be telling me this. How did you find out?" Noor sputtered, shaking her head. "This is crazy."

"Tell me about it." I told her everything that had happened since I last saw her.

"He's been alive this whole time?"

"Well, technically..."

"Undead. You know what I mean." Noor rolled her eyes. "He's been alive for what, a year now while you've been moping over having killed him?"

"I wasn't moping because I killed him," I protested.

"Say what you want, but you haven't been in a relationship since him. A few one-night stands don't count. You can't act like it didn't leave a mark."

She had a point. The whole incident had made me leery of relationships. "To be fair, I *had* been with him for one year."

"So what are you going to do?" she asked me.

"I don't have any leads. I can't rely on Ibrahim. He refuses to help. I'm going to have to check out all his old haunts. That's the best shot I have."

"How does the Alliance expect you to find him if they haven't managed to do it? Did they tell you how long they've been searching?"

"Six months now."

"Wow." She leaned back. "Do you think you'll find him?"

"I have to." I gestured around us. "If I don't, all of this is gone. We won't be able to live in peace."

Noor grimaced. "You know, sometimes I wonder what would happen if the truth came out. It might be a pleasant surprise."

I scoffed. "Knowing what you know about humans, would you put your faith in them to do the right thing?"

She shook her head. "No."

"That's why Sebastian can't succeed. He has to be stopped."

"Where are you going to go now?"

"I'm waiting on the Alliance to send me the list of locations he's been sighted at. Later tonight, I'm going to visit an old friend of his." I

raised my hand and lightly brushed my fingers against my cheek. It was time for some payback.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Are you going to be okay?" Noor's features were scrunched in concern. She reached out a hand and placed it over mine.

"Yes, why?" I patted at her hand distractedly.

"You just found out the ex-boyfriend you thought you killed is no longer dead. And now you've been tasked to hunt him down." She raised her eyebrows. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I mean, yeah, I'm pissed off at Ibrahim for not doing more, the Alliance for not being good enough, and myself for not having done the job right the first time." I shrugged. "Does that answer your question?"

Noor removed her hand. She bit her lip. "Just be careful. It's a huge emotional moment. Don't do anything you're going to regret."

"Like kill him?" My lips turned up in a half-smile. "I've already done that once."

She leaned forward. "Aisha, don't joke about it. The Alliance wants him alive. Don't make them angry with you. I don't want you to be locked up."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" She didn't look convinced.

"Yes." I put my hands in my lap so she wouldn't reach out and pet me again.

"Deliver him to them in once piece. I know you want to tear him apart, but leave that to them. Promise me you won't do anything stupid."

Before I could answer her, my phone beeped. I checked it and saw that Rafael had sent me the locations of each Sebastian sighting. "Can you get the map?"

Noor went to the coffee table in the living room. She returned with a map of Barcelona and unfolded it over the dining table. I plucked grapes from the fruit bowl and started placing them over each place Sebastian had been sighted. There were eleven locations in total.

I stood up to see the map from a different vantage point, trying to find a pattern. I looked over at Noor. "Notice anything?"

She shook her head.

I glanced back down at the map. The places Sebastian had been sighted were areas we had never been to: Les Corts, Nou Barris, Sant Andreu. He had been smart, but not smart enough to leave Barcelona.

There was one grape on the map that was closer to the Eixample area. I would start there.

"What are you going to do?" Noor asked.

"I'm going to visit each location and see if anything stands out. I may find more hints there."

"How long will it take you to scout out the places?"

"It depends. A few days, maybe more. I don't have much time to find him." I chewed my lip. "A few of those places could just be areas he was passing by, and there's no way of knowing what neighborhood he's staying in. I'll have to trust my instincts."

"Good luck."

I looked down at the map and the spread-out grapes. I grimaced. I was going to need all the luck I could get.

"Do you need anything, or shall I head back to work?" Noor asked me.

"No, thanks for showing up."

"Any time. I'll text you later."

Noor left, and I stood staring at the map. I glanced at my phone. I had enough time to go to one location today, so I decided to go to the one near Eixample.

Once I arrived, I decided to walk around the neighborhood. The camera Sebastian had been caught on was a supernatural's pet store, so I started there. I twisted my lips. The shifter inside was friendly as I showed her a picture of Sebastian and asked if she had seen him. She had no idea who he was.

I left the store and took a stroll around the place. The streets were wide, and it had a friendly community vibe. The people here were happy and content with their lives. Strangers smiled at me as I passed them. There were less than a handful of supernatural stores, and they didn't stand out because they blended in with the human ones.

There was a large sign on the nearby building. It said, "Continental Times." With a start, I realized it was the same newspaper that Sebastian used to read daily. I was fully aware that on any other day I would have walked past the building without noticing it, but with the knowledge that Sebastian was alive, I kept seeing things that reminded me of him. I had to focus that energy and make sure I saw more of these things. They could be helpful in locating him. I made note of the newspaper's building and moved on.

I kept a sharp eye out and tried to see why Sebastian would have been in the area. The fact that there weren't many supernaturals around had to be one of the reasons. There was a reduced likelihood of bumping into someone he knew. Here he could be almost invisible. Almost.

I figured that Mateu might have some ideas about where a rogue

vampire might hide. I wouldn't put it past the gargoyle to know a lot more about that than the Alliance. I pulled out my phone from my back pocket and glanced at the time. It was late, so I decided to visit Mateu tomorrow. Now it was time to return to the apartment.

I had blades to sharpen for my date tonight.

Chapter Thirty-Six

My blades were sharpened and tucked into their sheaths. I headed out to Immortal Blood, the vampire lounge. When I stepped up to the entrance, the bouncer simply stared down at me. He was so tall I wondered if he had giant's blood in him. He glared at me, and I knew it was because I didn't have a vampire escort. It was time to see if the vampires would bend their rules for me.

"I need to see Ethan," I said. I was pretty sure he was a regular. The lounge might be new, but Ethan was always out and eager for people to think he had an active social life, when the truth was he had few friends.

"Do I look like your errand boy?" The bouncer's voice was wispy. It surprised me. I wondered if people made fun of him for it.

"You can either get someone to see if he's in there, or I'm going to bust through you. Your choice." I glared back at the large man.

The bouncer and I stared at each other for several seconds. He blinked.

"I'll wait here." I took a few steps back.

His eyes narrowed. He raised a hand to his earpiece and said a few words. I tapped my foot. A few minutes later, a woman came outside and exchanged words with the bouncer. He pointed at me, and the vampire made her way to me, looking me up and down as she approached. I guess I didn't impress her, because she wrinkled her nose slightly.

"I've been told you have a message for Ethan. He's asked me to relay it to him."

"This message is for his ears only." My instincts hadn't let me down; I knew he'd be desperate to be part of the scene.

"I'm afraid you can't go in without an escort." Her apologetic smile was insincere.

"Good thing you're here to provide me with one." My smile was as sharp as the blades I held covertly against her torso.

She whirled on her heels and turned around. She was smart not to make a scene or call my bluff. The bouncer arched an eyebrow, and she raised her hand as we passed. The hostess weaved her way through the lounge until we arrived at the bar. There were two vampires sitting there with a stool separating them. One of them was Ethan, who was hunched over his drink. He had the look of a man

drowning his sorrows.

He looked up when we reached his elbow. "I thought I told you to take a message," he hissed at the hostess.

"The message was for your ears only. Do you require anything further?" Her voice was ice cold.

He bared his fangs. She turned away and left us, her shoulders stiff as she walked away. He glared at me. "Didn't I tell you to stay away?"

"You should know that I'm not good at taking orders."

He snarled. The other vampire glanced up, but he looked away when he saw my face.

"Stop acting like you're an alpha. You're not cut out for it. At best you're a Master's toy," I said.

"Well, this toy annihilated you the other day."

I smirked. "Only because I allowed it. If you're not convinced, we can take it outside and have a rematch." His eyes narrowed. I leaned forward and made sure only he could hear me. "Tell Sebastian that I'm coming for him."

He turned away from me to take another sip of his drink. He was buying time. He hadn't expressed surprise or denied it, which meant he knew where Sebastian was. I didn't need to know anything more.

By the time he turned back around, I had already left. There was nothing more to say to Ethan. I could follow him, but he would be on his guard, expecting me to do that. Giving him a warning to pass on to Sebastian was the next best thing. I knew Ethan would call Sebastian and let him know.

Sebastian had always been curious. He would expect me to know more than I actually did. There were many ways to catch a vampire. Setting a trap like this was one of them. Ethan would flush Sebastian out, and he would come to me. I wouldn't have to scour the neighborhoods for him.

I pushed past the dancers and stepped out into the evening. The bouncer glared at me, but he was the least of my concerns.

There was one other thing left to do. I had to go to La Barceloneta and leave Sebastian a message there. He'd know by the time Ethan delivered his message that I was circling around him like a shark. It would cause him to be erratic and careless. Careless bounties always made mistakes, and that's what I counted on. Leaving him a message at his favorite movie theater would further mess with his head. Psychological warfare was necessary to get to him.

I shoved my hands in my jacket pockets and weaved down the streets of Barcelona, thinking about my next move. It was a shame I couldn't have fought Ethan. I badly wanted to show him that I had allowed him to beat me the other day, but I couldn't let my ego affect my strategy. I needed Ethan focused on contacting Sebastian.

The night was cooler than the day, and I pulled my jacket closer to my body. Music drifted from open apartment windows nearby. I thought about the message I was going to leave for Sebastian. It had to be noticeable to the vampire, and had to strike the right balance between unnerving him and compelling him to seek me out. Something as simple as "I know" usually worked, because it implied that I knew more than he thought I did, but it would cause just as much panic. I had no idea who Sebastian had been speaking to or what he had been doing for the past year, but he didn't need to know that.

I was so distracted by my thoughts that it took me some time to realize I was being followed.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I kept walking, aware that I was being followed. I wondered if Ethan had trailed me after I left Immortal Blood. He may have decided to act on his threats and fight me anyways. To confirm I was being followed, I changed directions and took another street. I stopped at a window display and studied the merchandise. It allowed me a glimpse of my follower.

All I could determine was the silhouette was a man's, but I didn't know if it was Ethan or another supernatural. I debated on what to do as I started moving again. There was no reason to change my path now. I continued heading toward La Barceloneta. There were plenty of quiet streets to find out who was following me.

I slipped into an alley and extracted my dagger from my jacket. I waited, lightly gripping the hilt.

My follower turned the corner and found me standing there, dagger in hand. He halted in his tracks. It was a vampire. He was my height with a thin build. He had dark hair that was cropped close to his head.

I narrowed my eyes. I recognized him. He had been sitting next to Ethan at the bar. "Who are you?" I asked.

"A friend of Sebastian's."

I narrowed my eyes. "I don't know you."

"That's because I'm a new friend of his."

"What do you want?" I wondered if Ethan had sent him after me, and if Ethan had followed me, too. I scanned the area to make sure we were alone. I was a good fighter, but I knew when the odds were against me. Thankfully, I didn't see anyone.

"I want you to stop asking questions about Sebastian."

"Or what?" There was no sign of Ethan anywhere. I frowned.

The vampire appeared confused. "What?"

"*Or what?* A threat is only powerful when you give consequences. You want me to stop asking questions about Sebastian *or what*?"

The vampire's expression darkened. "Are you making fun of me?"

I rolled my eyes. There was nothing worse than a thin-skinned vampire.

"Don't make fun of me." He bared his teeth, his fangs elongating, showing his anger.

"Don't give me easy material."

This vampire was short-tempered. I guessed anything I would say would trigger him.

I was right. He rushed at me and slammed me into the wall. I winced as my body hit the rough bricks. I reached for my magic and whispered a chant. Nothing happened. He was using a magic dispeller. He must have felt the spell buzz. "I knew you'd use tricks, you witch. None of you scum can be trusted to fight straight."

Fine. Physical contact it was. I raised my knee and kicked him. He lurched away from me. "Filthy witch!"

I had to identify where his magic dispeller was, or I would have trouble getting to his heart. I needed to distract him. Insults would help. "Are you one of Sebastian's puppets?" I taunted.

"I'm no puppet, but where he leads, I follow!" He threw a fist at me. I ducked the blow. No bracelet on that wrist.

Heavens help me, he was a believer, too. Believers were dangerous with their zealous behavior. You couldn't use logic to reason with them. I continued to goad him. "You do his dirty work?"

"It's not dirty work to protect your friends."

"He's leading you astray." I slashed my dagger at his neck and made contact with his shirt. There it was, a glint of metal. That had to be the magic dispeller.

"He knows what's best for us all," he snarled.

"So you agree with what he's planning to do? You want to unleash humanity's wrath upon us?"

"You're blind just like the others. You don't see it. A change is coming. It's time for us to rule openly."

"You're a danger to our world. You aren't worthy of your immortality. Killing you is a pleasure." I pulled him to me by the collar of his t-shirt. He raised his hands to defend himself, but I tore at his necklace. I threw it on the ground and grabbed my other dagger. I stabbed it down into his neck. Letting go of his shirt, I used my other hand to plunge my secondary knife into his heart. He yelled and tried to bite me, but I avoided his snapping jaws, twisting the blade farther into his heart.

A small gasp made me turn my head to the alleyway. A teenage girl stood there, her eyes wide in shock, her mouth agape. She had long brown hair. A human.

She moved her hand, and I noticed the charmstone necklace around her neck.

Fire and brimstone. That meant she'd seen the vampire for what he was. I could have handled a regular murder sighting, but the Alliance would get involved in this. I couldn't afford that.

The vampire made a sound and grabbed my neck with weak hands. I turned my attention to him and finished the job. I looked to

the entrance of the alleyway only to see the girl's shoes retreating around the corner.

I let her go.

The vampire struggled in my arms, trying to break free. I twisted my blade in. Thankfully the fortified strength plunged past his bones and through his heart. He dropped to the ground. I straddled him, cutting out his heart.

I'd take care of the girl later.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Standing over the dead vampire, I realized I was amassing a new record of dead bodies in a week. Well, except for that one week a few years ago.

The girl remained an open end. She was the only one tying me to this incident. The Alliance couldn't know what had happened with this vampire. They would cause a scene and I could get locked up. It was too early to test our fledgling alliance. I wasn't going to voluntarily tell them I had killed a vampire. I had to find the girl.

I destroyed the vampire's heart and turned his body to ash with an incantation. I had no time for my usual routine; I had to hunt for the girl quickly. I went to the Gothic Quarter, directly to Mateu.

"Hey," I called up to the gargoyle.

He climbed down to me. "You've been visiting me a lot recently. You haven't given me enough time to catch up with the gossip."

"It's been a busy week."

"Did you hear about the lynx that showed up?" Mateu asked me.

I shook my head. "What about it?"

"Rumor has it he's here to challenge Diego."

I frowned. "A lynx will take on a dragon?"

Mateu shrugged. "Stranger things have happened. He disappeared shortly after he was sighted. We haven't seen an Iberian lynx in these parts in years."

We reached the outer perimeter of the cathedral. There was no one around except for a few homeless sleeping against the walls.

"What is it?" Mateu asked me.

"I'm looking for a girl. She's a human teenager with a charmstone."

"Why are you hunting children?"

I ran a hand through my curls, shaking them free. "I'm not hunting her. I'm looking for her."

"Aren't they one and the same to you?"

"She saw something she shouldn't have."

"What will you do to her?"

I frowned at the gargoyle. "I'm going to erase her memory of the incident, if that's okay with you. I didn't know you'd be so concerned."

"You won't harm her?"

"No, she's a kid. Why would I hurt a kid?" I just couldn't afford witnesses that the Alliance might get ahold of.

Mateu studied me carefully. Whatever he saw on my face must have decided for him, because he asked me, "What kind of charmstone?"

"A necklace. It was a little long, reached about here." I pointed at my chest to show him the length of the chain.

"Was it gold?"

"Yes."

"I met her," Mateu said. "She's one of the new DRAC recruits I told you about."

“Fire and brimstone,” I cursed. That meant she was living at the Dragon Research Authority Center. I'd have to go into Diego's territory to get to her. Despite myself, I felt a thrill at the idea. I had never been there, but with Diego knowing where I lived it seemed only fair that I go see his place.

"Do you know her name?" I asked Mateu.

He shook his head. "You know what it's like when they see a talking gargoyle. They get excited and ask me a million questions."

Actually, I didn't know what it was like, but I nodded all the same.

“Dina must know the girl’s name. She has to because of the charmstone,” he added.

"Thanks for the information. I don't need to tell you this, but keep this conversation close to you. I might be doing something stupid."

"I think that's a guarantee if you're thinking about entering dragon territory without Diego's knowledge or consent. I'll check out tomorrow's obituaries for your name." Mateu chuckled. The gargoyle had a twisted sense of humor. "It's a shame really, I was looking forward to that fight."

"Hopefully it won't come to that. Did you put money on me for the challenge?" I gave him a grin.

The gargoyle let out a high cackle. He struggled to breathe because he was laughing so hard.

"What's so funny? You may have decided to cheer for the underdog."

He wiped at his eyes. "Not in this fight. I really hope you survive this so I can see the Enforcer wipe the floor with you later."

I glared at him. "You'll be crying once you lose all your money."

Mateu chuckled again. "I'm sure. Thanks for the laugh. I needed it. Everyone's been so morose recently. Got any gossip to cheer me up?"

"Yes, here's something new. You'll enjoy this." I paused for dramatic effect as his eyes lit up in anticipation. "Sebastian's alive."

"Sebastian? Your ex-boyfriend Sebastian?" Mateu's eyebrows almost flew off his head.

"Yes, the one and the same. And there's something else."

Mateu's ears perked up. He loved getting great gossip.

"You know that chatter you've been hearing about supernaturals being exposed? He's behind all that."

"No," Mateu gasped, scandalized.

"Let me know immediately if you catch wind of him. He's next on my list."

"Sure. He can't reveal us to the humans. They'll destroy our world." Mateu stopped. He opened his mouth as if to say something and closed it again.

"What? Just ask me," I prodded.

"Rumor has it you're working with the Alliance now."

I didn't know why I was surprised; I knew the gargoyle knew everything. "That was quick."

He was smug. "I have good sources."

"Well, yes, when the option is either go to jail or join them, then there's really only one option available. I didn't have a choice."

Mateu tilted his head. "They have a bad reputation, but they're good people. It may take you some time to adjust, but the work they do is important."

"Why Mateu, are you a faithful?" I gave him a funny look.

He raised his paw toward his ear. "Don't tell them I said that."

I laughed. "We'll see how it goes, but you know their sources are never as good as you."

He beamed. "As long as you keep coming to me, I'll give you the good information."

"Here's a tidbit. I killed a vampire, so I've already violated my terms."

"Aisha!"

"Mateu!" I repeated in his scandalized tone. "I can't give up my ways completely."

I walked away from him as laughter echoed behind me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Thanks to Mateu's tip, I knew who to contact. Dina was the one person in Barcelona who legally dealt in charmstones. Charmstones were highly regulated due to their unique power of allowing humans to witness the supernatural world. When a human wore a charmstone, they could see what we supernaturals saw. Everything previously hidden would be revealed to them.

There was one jeweler who excelled at designing. The phone rang a few times before she picked up. "Hi, Dina," I said.

"Hello, Aisha. It's been a while. How have you been?"

"Doing okay. I wanted to ask you about a girl I met earlier. I didn't quite catch her name."

"You think I know her?"

"She was wearing a charmstone necklace. It was gold, on a longer chain, and round. She has long brown hair and light eyes."

"I know the necklace you're talking about. Hold on, let me get my records. The new batch of DRIPPs came by a while ago, and I don't remember her name."

"'Drips?'" I asked.

"Dragon Research Initiates Program Participant. It's the DRAC outreach program." I heard Dina moving objects as she searched for the information I needed. "Ah, yes. Gold necklace. Dragon stamp. The name's Vanessa Garcia."

"Thanks! I'd appreciate you not mentioning me asking about this."

Dina sighed. "Be careful, Aisha. Don't get yourself in trouble with the dragons."

"I appreciate the advice, but it's too late for that," I told her. "Thanks for the help."

"Any time." She hung up.

The DRAC headquarters was a few blocks away. As I walked over there, I reconsidered what I was about to do. The loose plan was to scope out DRAC headquarters, then try to break in and erase that girl's memory. She didn't need to know what I had done.

I looked at the stunning castle. The arrogant dragons hadn’t fortified their territory, and I could see that the building was accessible through multiple points. There was one main door on the front street. I walked around the building. There were other people around, so I didn't worry about looking suspicious; I looked like a

casual passerby. Balconies lined the upper floors of the building. I turned a corner to the back of the building. There was a park behind me. I was a little exposed there, so I stood closer to the bushes beneath a tree to give myself some cover as I made my plan to enter the headquarters.

I looked up and saw a tree leaning close to a balcony. I shook my head. Either the dragons *wanted* their recruits to sneak out, or they were completely unconcerned about security. It seemed strange.

I studied the balconies and saw two girls talking as they sat from across each other. One of them looked like the girl I was searching for, Vanessa Garcia.

I decided to test my theory. I cast an invisibility spell, then crossed the street to the headquarters. I scaled the building, making sure to say hello to the gargoyles around me. I wondered if they would report my passing. Perhaps Mateu would hear of my travels before I had a chance to ask him.

I climbed onto the balcony where the two girls were. I overhead enough of the conversation to realize that Vanessa had told her friend about me. Silently waiting, I listened to them until Vanessa got up and left her friend. She opened the door, and I squeezed out behind her. She closed the door of her friend's room. I looked around me. It was a common area with a dozen doors lining the hall. Some were open, but most were closed. At the far end seemed to be a television room; I could hear chatter coming from that direction.

I couldn't observe too much as Vanessa went to the next door and pushed it open. I slipped in behind her, but she was quick to close the door and nearly closed it on me. She frowned at the resistance, and I slipped past. She pushed the door again and it closed this time. Then she turned the lock.

She walked around the room, getting ready to go to bed. She disappeared into the bathroom, which gave me time to study her room. It was a regular room. It had a bed, bedside table, vanity table, bookshelf, desk, and closet. This room had a balcony, too. I looked out, noting that I could leave this way if I had to. I walked back to the door and leaned against it. I'd block the exit so she wouldn't run away.

I heard the toilet flush, and Vanessa exited the bathroom. She took off her necklace and studied it. The girl prepared to take off her shirt.

"Please don't do that. It will make things awkward," I said.

She jumped so high, I had to bite back a laugh. She spun around to face me. "Who are you?" She grabbed her amulet.

I uncrossed my arms and stepped forward. She held back a gasp. She must have recognized me from the alleyway. Stepping back, she said, "Don't come any closer!" Her voice shook, but I admired her confidence.

"Or what? You'll hit me with a necklace?" I asked her.

Vanessa grabbed a book from her desk and threw it at me. I let it hit me. It would probably make her feel better.

"Hey!" I frowned and rubbed my arm. I bent down to pick it up and turned it over to read the title. It was some sort of guidebook with rules. "Oh, I've read this one. It's good reading. Every rule break results in death." I was joking, of course. I had no idea what was inside, but I could imagine that being the dragons' rule. I tried for a lighter tone, setting the book down on her bed as the teenager stood frozen, staring at me. "You shouldn't throw books around."

"Aren't you here to kill me?"

"No, why would I do that?" I was confused.

"You killed that vampire in the alley."

Oh. No wonder she was petrified. She was stuck in here surrounded by dragons and had seen me stab a vampire, and here I was making jokes about dragons killing her. Oops.

"Why?" she asked.

Again, I admired her boldness. "It was his day," I replied calmly. It didn't matter what I told her since I was going to erase all memory of this encounter anyways.

"How did you find me?" Vanessa asked, pulling the charmstone necklace over her head and tucking it under her shirt. It probably made her feel safer.

"Suspicious type, aren't you? Well, that keeps you alive, so don't forget. Don't trust anyone. Anyways, I saw the charmstone, and I know they're limited. I asked around and found there was a new batch of kids in the program." I shrugged. "It was relatively easy."

"That was pretty fast," she said.

"I've got connections. Now, I'm just going to cast a little spell to make you forget what you saw." I started walking toward her, which only caused her to start backpedaling again.

"Why?" Her eyes widened, displaying her fear. "I won't say anything."

"The people I work for don't like having witnesses. If I don't do it, they'll come after you. Trust me, it's better this way." I lied about the Alliance knowing what had happened, but the sentiment was true. "Okay, I know I just told you not to trust people, but trust me on this one."

"I don't want you to put a spell on me." She backed up until she hit the wall. She looked toward the balcony and then back at the door, weighing her escape options.

"You don't really have much of a choice. I could wait until you're asleep and do it then, but I try not to be so sneaky." I waited for her to decide.

"You promise you'll only erase memories of what happened in the alley?" she asked nervously.

"Yes."

"Fine." Vanessa sat on her bed and waited.

I approached her swiftly. I saw her flinch as I took out my dagger and placed it on the nightstand. "I'm not going to kill you," I reassured her. "I could do that quietly without all this fuss."

"Go on then, get it over with," she said.

Clearly this girl was terrified, so I tried to make small talk. "My name's Aisha. What's yours?" She didn't need to know I already knew it.

"Vanessa."

"It helps if you relax when I work this spell. I'm not a mind-reader, but I can see how tense you are."

"How did you find me if you didn't know my name?"

"I'm very good at tracking people," I said. She was a smart one. I raised my hands and placed them on her head. I closed my eyes to concentrate. I drew upon my magic and frowned. "Are you wearing a magicked item?"

Vanessa pulled out her pendant from under her shirt. "Just this."

"Take it off." Something was blocking my spell. As far as I knew, charmstones didn't act as magic dispellers, but I couldn't use my magic on this girl. She removed the pendant, and I took it from her. "This is beautiful. Dina's a true artist."

"You know her?"

"She's a friend." I turned the pendant over. "You must love dragons if you signed up to be around them all the time." I placed my hand on her head again and concentrated. After a few seconds I rocked back on my heels.

"What is it?" Vanessa asked.

"I thought it was the pendant, but it's not."

"What's not? What are you talking about?"

I hesitated, studying the teenager. I wasn't sure it was a good idea to tell her what I had discovered.

"Tell me!"

I pressed my lips together. At her expression, I reluctantly told her.

Chapter Forty

I had infiltrated the Dragon Research Authority Center to erase the girl's memory, but I hadn't been able to do it. Vanessa may have been immune to my magic, but her friend wasn't. I snuck back over to the room belonging to Vanessa's friend and extracted the memory of Vanessa telling her what she had witnessed.

Since I couldn't erase Vanessa's memory, we had come to an agreement. She promised she wouldn't tell anyone about seeing me and the vampire. In return, I told her I wouldn't tell the dragons what she was: a witch. The DRAC only accepted non-magical humans into their program, and Vanessa would surely be in trouble if her magical blood was discovered. I briefly wondered how Diego would take the news if he ever found out.

Before I left the facility, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity and take a tour of the center. I wanted to see where Diego and the Enforcer lived. It was risky to wander around the place with the shifters' heightened sense of smell, but I would be careful.

The quarters Vanessa and her friend lived in were composed of twelve bedrooms, a communal living room, and a library. I wondered if there was another wing full of humans or if the dragons only had one batch of initiates during the year. I moved slowly through the area. As I passed one of the communal areas, I saw a haughty-looking girl lording over a skinny boy. I rolled my eyes. I wondered what the dragons had been thinking when they invited the likes of her to witness our secrets.

The main door opened, and I used the opportunity to slip past the human to go outside. I was in a long hallway with red triangles on the sides of the wall that pointed toward the door I had just exited. I moved down the hallways, confident in my invisibility spell.

I went down a flight of stairs, keeping my footsteps soft and eyes open for any shifters moving about. As I kept moving through the place, I wondered at the lack of shifters around. Where were they? A large window at my side showed me the answer: a huge courtyard outside where dozens of shifters were mingling. I wondered if they were all dragons or if there were other types of shifters among them. Either way, the result would be pretty combustible. The number of dragon shifters who lived or worked at the center made for an explosive living arrangement.

I made my way down two more flights of stairs to the ground floor and wandered around. On a whim, I tried a door and it opened. I stepped inside the room and felt like I had entered a museum. Objects in glass displays and on pillars decorated the room. I shut the door, leaving it open a fraction. I never trusted a completely closed door. I wandered around and studied the items briefly. There were weapons, swords, daggers, and shields in addition to bright gemstones and small trinkets. I wondered why they were all housed in this room. It seemed strange for all of these things to be on open display when all tales mentioned dragons jealously hoarding their treasures. It would be painfully easy to pick up any item here and walk away with it. The thought was still in my mind as I left the room.

Taking stock of where I was, I headed in the direction of the front door. I'd slip out from there.

There was a huge wooden desk and a young male slouched lazily in a chair. He was talking on the phone. "One of the initiates came back out of breath. It was still early from lock-up, so it wasn't the time that made her hurry back." He listened to the person on the other end and answered, "No, I didn't ask her. She looked scared. It could be something or it might be nothing. They're still new, so a lot of things are bound to scare them. I just thought you should know." He waited before speaking again. "I'm not babysitting initiates. I have enough on my plate as it is."

The shifter's head rose slightly. Shit. He could smell me.

I backtracked quietly. Before he left my sight completely, I saw him turn his head toward where I was just standing and frown. "What? Sorry, can you repeat that? No, nothing, I just thought I smelled brimstone. What were you saying?"

There was nothing more to do. I was satisfied by my tour of the Dragon Research Authority Center. I wasn't about to push my luck by wandering into the path of other dragon shifters. I followed the red triangles all the way back to the initiates' quarters. As I made my way back up the stairs, I wondered if the shifter would try to figure out what the smell had been. I looked down at my outfit. Hanging my clothes in Noor’s closet had been an excellent idea. The shifter hadn’t even caught my scent of cloves. I was in the clear.

I gently pushed open the door of the initiates' wing. Thankfully, no one was there to witness the door magically opening by itself. I closed the door behind me and searched for an open doorway. I noticed one across from Vanessa's room. I slipped into the bedroom. It was empty. I slid open the balcony door and closed it from the outside. I shimmied down the building, saying goodbye to the dragon gargoyles. I wondered idly if they would tattle and reveal that an invisible person had talked to them.

Once I was safely back on the ground, I put as much distance between me and the building as possible. I stood across the street and looked at the castle with its four towers. I wondered what Diego would do if he found out I had snuck through his headquarters and explored without anyone being the wiser. The dragon shifters had incredibly lax security. It wouldn't surprise me if I wasn’t the first person do to this.

I took one last look at the building and shook my head. I wouldn't be the one to tell Diego to fortify his security. Besides, one day I might need to sneak back in again.

Chapter Forty-One

I slept in the following day, my body tired from the previous day's activities. When I finally got out of bed, I went to the roof and did my usual workout. After a shower, I padded over to the dining room table and stared at the map with its grape markers. I remembered the *Continental Times* building. I went down to the supermarket and got a copy of the newspaper.

Back upstairs in my apartment, I spread the newspaper on the coffee table and scanned the bylines. I kept shifting from one article to the next until I found him. Charlie Gale. Sebastian's favorite journalist.

I pulled out my laptop and did some research. It was easy to find the journalist's home address. I went over to the dining room table and located it on the map. It was a neighborhood where Sebastian had been sighted. There had been surveillance photos of Sebastian in both the area of the newspaper building and the journalist's home address. It couldn't be a coincidence. Since Sebastian was working on revealing the existence of supernaturals, he must have contacted the journalist to break the story.

I had a couple options: I could go solo and try to solve this myself, or I could test the new friends I'd made. I picked up the phone and called Rafael.

He picked up on the second ring. "Good morning."

"Good morning. How are you?" I cut right to the chase. "Curious. I need you to track Charlie Gale. He works at the *Continental Times*. I need phone and financial records."

"Why?"

"He's Sebastian's favorite reporter. If there was anyone he would give his story to, it would be him."

"What are you doing?" Rafael asked me.

"Waiting on the records."

He laughed. "I'm at ASP. Come over and the records should be available by the time you arrive."

"Sounds good. See you in twenty minutes." I guess the Alliance did have good resources after all.

I dressed and headed over to the headquarters.

Rafael met me at the elevator. "Leon has a few questions."

We walked together to Leon's office. He was working on his laptop when we entered. When he saw us, he pushed the cover down and

waited for me to have a seat. "Make your case."

I sat in the chair. Rafael remained standing, leaning against the wall. I arched an eyebrow. "About?"

"Why you need a journalist's phone and financial records."

I glanced at Rafael and back at Leon. "I already told Rafael."

"Why do you think Sebastian would contact this reporter?" Leon asked.

"What's the problem here? You asked me to locate Sebastian, and I need resources. You told me that the full resources of the Alliance were available for me. The contacts I usually refer to won't help in this case."

"Ibrahim?" Leon guessed.

"He's one of them," I admitted.

"And why do you think Charlie Gale is involved?"

"I dated Sebastian for a year and he was obsessed with Gale. Didn't you ask me for my feedback? Isn't that why you chose me to do this job?"

Leon leaned back, studying me, then waved a hand at Rafael. "Give her want she needs."

I stood up. Rafael didn't budge. I glanced back at Leon and realized he was waiting for me to say something. I thought about Rafael requesting that I come in, and something clicked. I sank back into the chair. "Oh, and I killed a vampire."

Leon didn't show any surprise. They already knew.

Whoever was keeping tabs on me had been an invisible tail that night. I was going to have to figure this out. I couldn't be monitored all the time. The one thing I knew for sure was that it wasn't the girl, Vanessa. I had overheard the conversation with her friend. They hadn't told anyone yet. I wondered if the Alliance knew I had breached the Dragon Research Authority Center. Probably. The question was, would they have told Diego?

"You violated your contract," Leon said.

"No, I didn't." I smiled at him. "It was self-defense." I was glad I had put that clause in.

"Working with you is going to kill me," Leon muttered. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Fine, we'll get you your records. Come back in the afternoon and they'll be waiting for you."

"Why did you have me come in if you couldn't get them?" I was growing frustrated. The Alliance was wasting my time while I could have been getting closer to locating Sebastian.

Leon gestured at the door.

I stood up stiffly and left.

Rafael followed me out. As soon as we left Leon's office, Rafael chuckled. "Leon's not the only one you're going to be the death of.

Want to tell me why you had a guilty expression on your face after admitting you killed the vampire?"

"Why should I tell you? Are you going to tell him?" I shot him a look. I was annoyed with him for bringing me in.

"I might. Depends on how bad it is," Rafael admitted. At least he didn't lie to me. I could be mad at him for keeping me out of the loop, but it was his job nonetheless. I was the consultant they were supposed to tame.

I fluffed my hair. "I went to Diego's castle and checked it out."

Rafael frowned. "What's so bad about that?"

I tucked a few strands of hair behind my ear and tried for an innocent expression.

Rafael's jaw dropped open. "You didn't!"

I allowed myself a grin. "I did."

"You went inside the dragon's lair?" Rafael laughed. He shook his head. "Do you have a death wish? Are you trying to get yourself killed? I mean, at this point Leon and Diego will probably have to flip a coin for the honor."

Rafael walked me to the car. He leaned in and kissed me on the lips.

"What was that for?" I asked him. Not that I was complaining, but I wanted to know what had inspired it.

"Thanks for being in my life. I'd like to ask you for a favor: please don't tell Leon what you did." He paused thoughtfully. "Or wait until I'm around to see it." His eyes sparkled.

Chapter Forty-Two

Leon was true to his word. I showed up later that afternoon and was led to a small room. A pile of records had been printed and were sitting in a big pile on a spindly desk. They had provided me with pens and a few different colored highlighters. I rolled up my sleeves and got to work. I had to find the pattern.

This was the boring work I hated, but I was good at identifying patterns. If I found a recurring number, then I was sure I would find Sebastian, or at least a family member. I'd chase down all leads. I wondered if Sebastian used burner phones. That's what I would do, but then again, not everyone was as paranoid as I was. He was probably secure in the knowledge that most people thought he was dead.

Two hours later, Rafael stopped by. "How's it going?"

"Slow."

"Need help?" His eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Sure." I grinned at him. It would be nice to have some company.

We rifled through the files in silence. After a few minutes of this, he spoke up. "So, when are we going on our second date?"

I looked up at him. "Did we actually have a first date?" Whatever we had going on seemed to involve a lot of flirting and a lot of good times. In bed.

"Dinner. Dancing. Fun times." He checked them off on his fingers. "I think all three qualify for a successful first date."

I grinned at him. "But it was a serendipitous encounter, don't you think?"

"Can we repeat this serendipitous encounter?"

"Or we can just cut right to the fun times," I said.

"You have to be careful, or I'll begin thinking you're using me for my body." He sucked in his stomach and flexed an arm.

"You just figured it out?" I laughed and touched his flexed muscle. "I really, *really* enjoy the fun times."

His eyes turned serious, despite the smile on his lips. "I would like to actually spend time with you. Not in bed."

"So would I, but..." My voice trailed off. I wasn't sure how to say it. It had been exciting to jump into bed with someone I had such great chemistry with. And the attraction between us was still going strong, but I just didn't know if it was smart for this to turn it into something

serious. Noor would say I was scared of being hurt like I had been in my last relationship, but a part of me thought I had just grown accustomed to being by myself. It felt strange to try to make room for someone else in my life.

Rafael frowned. He lowered his arm, and I withdrew my hand. My reaction may not have been what he expected. "Is it this case?"

I nodded my head and looked down at the files spread out before us. "A little. It just feels weird that I'm chasing after my ex and I'm working for the Alliance. You're my coworker. I haven't been in a relationship in a long time. It's a lot of things," I admitted, looking back up at him and running my fingers through my hair.

"But not weird enough for you to hang out with me the other day?" Rafael tried to understand. "Is it the way we met? Do you think I want to be with you just to keep tabs on you for the Alliance? Because that's not what's happening here."

"No." I shook my head. The thought had crossed my mind, but I had dismissed it. "I know you don't need to go to those lengths. Leon still knew about the vampire. That's driving me crazy, by the way. Any chance you'll let me know what kind of surveillance I'm under?" I asked him lightly in an attempt to change the subject.

Rafael smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I don't even know the answer to that. I'm compromised due to my relationship with you. They won't tell me anything."

I swallowed hard. "We don't have a relationship. A relationship is different."

He shrugged. "My involvement with you, then. Call it what you will. It amounts to the same thing to them."

The room was silent. It was awkward and heavy. I didn't know how to break it without sounding more callous. Before the tension could grow to be unbearable, Rafael said, "Here's a suggestion: stop thinking and just go along with it."

"I don't want to hurt you," I confessed. It was flattering how interested he was, but it was also terrifying.

He chuckled. "Don't worry about me. I'm a big boy. I just really like our time together and want more. Think about it." Rafael paused. "If you can't work with me, then I can get assigned somewhere else. My role here is flexible enough for that. Don't feel trapped by our proximity at work."

It was considerate of him to offer. "Thank you. I'll think about it."

Rafael pressed his lips together. I wondered what he had been about to say. He looked down at the papers. "Let's keep going. We'll find the pattern."

I had color-coded recurring numbers and spread the papers around. I stood up on a chair and looked at the mess, trying to

unfocus my eyes and find a pattern. Sure enough, I caught a repeating color.

"Take a look at this." I stepped off the chair and pointed at a row. "This number keeps calling Charlie every night around the same time. They spend an hour or more on the phone. Do you think this is Sebastian, his girlfriend, or his mother?"

"Can we get the address the number is linked to?" Rafael turned to the computer in the room with us. We looked it up and discovered it was a warehouse.

Rafael glanced at me. "What do you think? Should we go check it out?"

"Yes." Any lead was worth pursuing. This could be where Sebastian was hiding out.

We drove for about ten minutes before we arrived at the warehouse. The pavement around it was cracked, and weeds had made a valiant effort to reclaim their territory. Almost every window was broken, and glass glittered along the ground beneath each one.

"It looks abandoned, but let's check." Rafael picked the lock and opened the door. "Ladies first."

We wandered around the empty space. I kept an eye open for any hidden areas where a vampire could hide, but it appeared to be exactly what it was: an abandoned warehouse.

"This is disappointing," I said.

Rafael shrugged. "Not all leads turn out to be golden. Maybe the next one will be it. We can go to Charlie's deli."

Charlie regularly had lunch at a deli down the street from work. We'd picked up the information from the financial records the Alliance had provided.

"Sure, let's go."

Even if we didn't find Charlie, I could get a sandwich.

Chapter Forty-Three

The deli was large but had a cozy vibe. The air smelled of freshly-ground coffee, and warm pastries were displayed in the cases by the register. Tables were lined up on both sides of the wall, including a few in the center of the place, and toward the back was a counter with a display full of salads and sandwiches. Most of the tables were vacant, but we saw a man was sitting at one table with a book in front of him and one other woman sitting in the corner with her laptop propped open.

"Are you hungry?" Rafael asked.

"Yes, I need a sandwich and orange juice."

We walked up to the counter and I perused the selection of sandwiches. I finally decided on a turkey sandwich. Rafael chose a chicken sandwich and coffee.

We sat at a table in the front of the shop, close to the entrance. I bit into my sandwich, suddenly ravenous. "How did you start working for the Alliance?" I asked him. We had become serious so quickly, but there was still so much I didn't know about him.

"It was what my family wanted, and I decided to indulge them." Rafael took a sip of his coffee.

"Why did they want you to join?"

"They thought someone in the family should be a member, and I was the only one of my siblings that had nothing else to do."

"How many siblings do you have?"

"Six."

I gaped at him. "Six?"

"Yes. How many do you have?"

"None. Only child." I couldn't imagine having any siblings, never mind six of them. It must have been a noisy upbringing.

"Did your parents spoil you?" Rafael smiled.

"I grew up with my mother, but I never knew my father. My mother was intense and very focused. She had a healthy dose of paranoia and thought the world was going to end at any moment. She aimed some of that excess energy toward me, and, no, she didn't spoil me." My sandwich was disappearing fast.

"That sounds like a difficult upbringing." His smile had disappeared.

"It's all I knew." I shrugged. There was no need for his sympathy. I

had grown up safe and healthy. I changed the topic. "Why did your family think someone should be in the Alliance?"

"They believe in service. My other siblings all have jobs that benefit the supernatural community," Rafael said.

His answer seemed evasive. I decided to let it pass. He was entitled to his secrets as long as he kept out of mine. "Do you think Charlie will show up?" I asked him. I sipped my orange juice.

"The records show that Charlie picks up lunch here every day," he said in a light tone.

I glanced up at the door as it opened. A redhead stepped in. She had shoulder-length hair, wide blue eyes, and a splatter of freckles along her nose and cheeks. She went to the counter to order. I looked out the windowpane and shook my head. Maybe today wasn't going to be the day to find Charlie Gale.

I took the last bite of my sandwich. After I swallowed, I asked, "What should we do if he doesn't show up?"

Rafael didn't answer me. He was watching the redhead. I glanced at her. We watched as she walked over and settled at a table near us. She placed her tray down and started unfolding her napkin.

"Let's go," Rafael said, getting to his feet. He left his tray on the table.

I frowned. I disliked it when people didn't tidy up after themselves. It seemed out of character for the courteous fae.

"Are we leaving?" I asked, standing up. I pointedly picked up my tray.

Confused, I watched Rafael walk past me. He walked over to the redhead and I followed, still holding onto my tray.

"Charlie Gale? We have a few questions for you," Rafael told her.

The redhead looked up at the two of us. She switched between Rafael and me, frowning at the tray I held in my hands. Rafael gave me a sideways glance and looked down at the tray. He smirked.

"Yes?" She was cautious. Her hand left her sandwich and reached toward her purse.

Rafael lowered himself into the empty seat. "Mind if we join you?" He was trying to appear non-threatening by getting down to her level.

I turned and disposed of my tray and returned to take the seat next to Rafael.

We had also effectively blocked her from escaping. From the look on her face, she'd realized the same thing.

I smiled, trying to appear friendly.

She flinched.

I guess that smile was less friendly than I hoped.

"We're looking for a common friend," Rafael told Charlie.

Her eyes narrowed. "Does your friend have a name?"

"Sebastian."

She memorized our features. I looked at her hands. "Do you want to put your hands on the table?" I asked gently. "Are you recording this?"

"What if I am?"

I shook my head and spoke quickly. "It doesn't matter. Sebastian knows we're looking for him. We need your help locating him. He's doing things that will have a lot of ramifications for a lot of people, and I'm sure you're aware of that or you wouldn't have waited this long." I got to my feet and gestured at Rafael to do the same. "We won't bother you. Please tell him Aisha says hello."

We walked away. Rafael picked up his tray and put it away. The gesture restored the balance in how I viewed him. I knew his earlier behavior had been out of character. The world made sense again, and it gave me a profound sense of relief. I waited for him at the door.

Rafael whispered, "What was that?"

We left the shop and stood outside, away from Charlie Gale's view.

I turned to him. "The best thing to do to a journalist is pique their curiosity. She knows we want Sebastian. We asked her to pass along the message. She'll want to know more about who I am, and Sebastian's the only one who can give her that information. She'll have to get in touch with him. If we're lucky, she'll do it while we're listening in on her call. All we have to do is wait."

Rafael shook his head. "Okay, boss."

I smiled. Then I gave in to the impulse that had consumed me since I saw him pick up his tray and I kissed him.

His eyes danced when he pulled away. "This isn't the time for distractions."

"Sorry, boss."

He pulled me to him and kissed me. He whispered into my ear, "It seems like you know all my fantasies. Let's return to it another time. We need to focus." He withdrew, a crooked smile on his lips.

I grinned at him. I pulled his hand and dragged him into the alley.

Chapter Forty-Four

Rafael protested as I pulled him into the narrow alleyway. "Aisha, we really need to focus."

"We will." I let go of his hand. "Do you have any magic dispellers on you?"

He raised his right hand and showed me the cuff on his wrist.

"Take it off," I instructed him.

He followed my request and I took the cuff from him, slipping it into my pocket. I started murmuring under my breath. Rafael fidgeted as I placed the invisibility spell over him. I did the same for myself.

"We're in a cocoon," I explained. "People outside the sphere cannot see us or hear us. If an Alliance street sweeper passed by they'd feel my magic, so I hope you've got enough pull to justify this."

"What are you going to do?"

"I tapped into her phone. Whatever call she makes will be heard here."

Rafael pressed his lips together. "Illegal tapping. I need a warrant for that."

"Only if they catch us."

He shook his head but didn't protest.

I raised my phone to my ear, and Rafael leaned in close to listen. It took a couple of minutes, but we soon heard a dial tone. I inhaled sharply as I heard that familiar voice. "Hello?"

It was Sebastian.

Rafael gave me a concerned look. We listened as Charlie told Sebastian about the encounter.

"Who?" Sebastian asked after she had given him my name.

"She said her name was Aisha. She said hello."

"How did she find you? No, never mind. Why did she find you? Where are you right now?" He sounded panicked.

I smiled grimly. Good.

"I'm at the deli. How did they know I was here and that I knew you? Who are they? Who is she?" Charlie asked him, interrogating him just like the good journalist she was.

"She's nobody," Sebastian snarled.

Rafael raised an eyebrow, concern evident on his features.

I stuck out my lower lip in exaggerated sadness and rubbed an imaginary tear from my eye.

The concern on his face was soon replaced with sparkling eyes and a crooked grin.

"You seem awfully upset with this 'nobody' meeting me," Charlie said. Smart woman.

"We need to go live with the story." There were sounds in the background on Sebastian's end. They sounded like papers ruffling.

"You know how things stand with my editor. He's not fully on board yet. I need a little more time."

"Get him on board, or I'll go with someone else. It's been long enough." Sebastian raised his voice.

"You know these things take time, otherwise you sound like a crazy nut with a conspiracy theory." Charlie tried to reason with him, keeping her tone cool and professional. "I told you he needs two more sources before he takes this seriously. In addition to the story being approved, you have to send out teasers and get the public ready to hear it. Otherwise no one will be interested."

"I gave you sources. I introduced you to Ethan. You heard his story. I'm done with excuses and delays. Make this happen or you'll lose your only source on this," Sebastian threatened, and hung up on her.

I pulled on Rafael's arm and we moved over to the window to see how Charlie was taking it. She was looking down at her phone in frustration. She didn't know what decision to take.

She raised her phone again. We listened in as she talked to her editor.

"I'm telling you, this guy is legit. I'm willing to stake my reputation on it," Charlie said.

"Then let me meet him," her editor replied.

Charlie sighed. "He doesn't want to meet."

"Then how can I trust his story?"

"Don't you trust me?" The journalist sounded frustrated.

"I do, but this whole thing has been strange from the beginning. I'll need tangible proof to sell it. I'd be staking the reputation of the paper on this. And you know the rule: any story has to be sourced by three people."

"I think I met two today." She gave him a brief overview of the encounter with us.

"That's great. Can you get them on the record for your story?"

Rafael and I looked at each other. I raised my eyebrow. His eyes sparkled with mirth.

"No," she admitted.

"Then what's the point? You tell your source to get you two more sources on the record. Once they clear the fact-checker, we're good to go."

"I'll get them for you," she promised.

The editor paused. "This is one of the craziest stories I've ever heard. If you break it and it's legit, you'll be changing the world. Are you ready for that?"

I could see from her expression that it was something she wanted to do.

"We need to grab her," I told Rafael. "Sebastian's given her too much information and she knows too much."

"I agree. We should go over tonight," he affirmed.

"What will happen to her? Will they erase her memory?"

"The Alliance will take care of it." Rafael appeared grim. "Even if they erase her memory, we'd have to take care of the editor and neutralize Sebastian. We'll have to find out anyone she's spoken to about this."

I thought it through. "We can use her as bait to get to Sebastian. Once we get him, we can get to her editor. We can also get her to tell us about anyone else she's told."

Rafael nodded. "That may work. We can go to her apartment after her work is done."

"Will you tell Leon?"

Rafael shook his head. "We'll tell him once we have her."

We looked back through the window at Charlie Gale. Her life was going to change tonight, and she had no idea at all. I glanced at Rafael and pulled him back into the alley. I took away the invisibility spell and we walked away from the deli. We spent the rest of the afternoon planning how we were going to kidnap the journalist.

Chapter Forty-Five

Rafael and I waited in Charlie Gale's apartment covered in an invisibility spell.

Charlie walked in with Sebastian.

"So you're telling me that your editor wants two other people? My word wasn't enough?" Sebastian was cross.

Charlie sighed. "It's the rule for a story, and you know how this is more sensational than most."

"I've been telling you for months now."

She tried to change the subject. "Why don't you introduce me to some of your vampire friends?"

"If they know we're going to break it, they will kill you." Sebastian was frustrated. "What about that don't you understand? The vamps don't want their world to come crashing down around them. No one does. Do you know what it means for them? They've ruled you secretly for a millennium and none of you has been any the wiser. They make money off your backs. They want to maintain the status quo. Any vampires I introduce you to will tear out your throat without a backwards glance."

"There has to be somebody from your world you can introduce me to."

"You won't be able to see. The only way you can would be through..." He broke off, probably thinking of Dina's charmstones. He shook his head. "No, that would just be asking for more trouble… There's a stone that can help humans see the supernatural world, but they're highly regulated, so stealing one is out of the question."

"No, that won't work anyway. You'd have to introduce me to a vampire or a witch or something," Charlie said.

Sebastian thought about it. "Tell me again, what did Aisha say?"

"First there was a man. He was slim with delicate features." As a human, Charlie wouldn't spot Rafael's pointed ears. She continued, "He sat in the chair, and the one you call Aisha, with the wavy hair, sat down as well. He asked me where you were and said that they were friends of yours."

Sebastian shook his head. "I don't know that man. He doesn't sound like anyone I've met."

Charlie went on, "Then Aisha asked if I was recording and said it didn't matter in the end. And then they left."

Sebastian's eyebrows raised. "If I were Aisha, I would stand outside and listen to your conversations."

"How?"

"She's a *witch*. You wanted to meet one, and you have. She can use invisibility spells and everything."

Charlie was silent for a moment, then spoke up. "My editor has a copy of the first draft of my story. I told him to publish it if I was found dead in a mysterious manner."

I stilled. Sebastian paused, too. The journalist had made a blunder. She thought Rafael and I were the risk in the situation, but it would be Sebastian that would benefit from her death. With one stroke, Sebastian could guarantee his story reached the world. He didn't need to worry about her stubborn editor. He didn't need Charlie anymore. He just needed to kill her in a way that her editor would deem mysterious.

"You need to talk to him," Sebastian insisted.

"He needs time or sources."

"Time's run out if Aisha's found you. What about this aren't you understanding?" Sebastian paused. "Are you sure they're following you for the story?"

"I don't know."

"She's already tried to kill me once before," Sebastian confided.

"What? Why?"

"We dated for some time." Sebastian paced.

I resisted the urge to dash across the room and stab him. A year was not 'some time.' How could I have been with such an annoying guy? I glanced at Rafael and wondered what he thought of Sebastian.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," Sebastian said.

"You shouldn't." I stepped forward. I couldn't take any more of this.

“Fire and brimstone,” Sebastian cursed. He instantly moved toward Charlie and stood in front of her. "I knew I should have checked for spells."

"You were never as paranoid as you should have been," I said.

Rafael stepped forward, and the spell shimmered and fell away from him.

The journalist stared at us wide-eyed from behind Sebastian's shoulder. "That's them!" she squealed. "Did they...? Is that...?"

We all ignored her.

"Turn yourself in," Rafael said to Sebastian.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Rafael pulled out his ID and flashed it at the vampire. "Alliance."

Sebastian looked between the two of us incredulously. He bit back a harsh laugh and turned to me. "You're working with the Alliance? You? What's happened?" He turned to Rafael, his features serious once

more. "You know she's an assassin, right?"

From behind him, Charlie squeaked, "Assassin?"

"She's Alliance," Rafael said.

Sebastian's hands turned to fists. "You know what I'm doing is right," he told me.

I shook my head. "You don't know what's right anymore. You're so invested in this that you've lost track of how many people would suffer by your revelation. Humanity would turn on us."

Sebastian's hands had begun to shake. We were entering dangerous territory. "You don't know that. Those are the lies they tell you to keep you in your place."

"What benefit is there to tearing our systems down?" I asked him. It was a question I'd asked him many times before. He never gave me a good enough answer.

"We have to tear it down to start fresh. Why can't you see that?" Sebastian yelled.

"Because you're so intent on destruction, it doesn't make sense," I said back. I knew my explanations were futile. There was no reasoning with Sebastian.

"Supernaturals need to be held accountable. They must be revealed." His eyes were desperate.

Somehow, I knew what he was going to do before he did it. I rushed forward, but I was still too late. Sebastian turned around, grabbed Charlie, and ripped her throat out.

Chapter Forty-Six

Charlie clutched her throat and gurgled as she slid down to the floor, blood pooling around her.

I rushed to her side. I bent down and slammed my hands against her wound to stop the bleeding. "It's okay. You're going to be okay."

Her eyes were panicked, staring at me.

Sebastian stood there defiantly. "Now her editor will have to publish the story. The truth will come out."

Rafael moved toward him, but Sebastian was fast, and he disappeared out the door. Rafael ran after him.

"Stop," I called out to him.

Rafael looked back at me.

I had to explain quickly. Charlie's blood was everywhere. I could feel her pulse weakening. "We can't let that happen. We can't make the editor disappear. It will be too suspicious. We need to take her to Ibrahim."

"How?" Rafael peered at the journalist. He knew she was dying.

"He owes me." Ibrahim also owed the Alliance. Giving him the journalist would lay the fault squarely at his door, and he wouldn't be able to stand aside and claim that this had nothing to do with him. As a Master, he had to take accountability for Sebastian's actions.

"She won't make it." Rafael kept his voice low so Charlie wouldn't hear him.

"It doesn't matter. He'll still be able to raise her after she dies if we get there soon enough." I stared down at the journalist. "Do you want to live?"

It was slight, but she nodded. Her eyes fluttered as she began to lose consciousness. We didn't have much time. I looked at Rafael. "Pick her up. We need to get her to Ibrahim quickly."

My only wish was that Ibrahim was home and not out somewhere. We had wrapped Rafael's jacket around her neck, but she passed out in Rafael's arms halfway down the stairs. We sped through the streets of Barcelona to get to Eixample. Rafael parked as close to the house as possible. I smashed Ibrahim's door open, yelling for him. I moved through his place to the living room.

The vampire appeared instantly. I must have shocked him. He gaped at the three of us.

"Put her down there." I pointed at the couch.

Rafael complied with my instructions.

Ibrahim stared after us. "Who is that?" he asked me.

"Your progeny's victim." I couldn't keep the bitter tone out of my voice.

"What?" He blinked.

"Sebastian did this. But you can bring her back."

"You want me to turn her?"

"Yes," I said.

"Why?" He crossed his arms.

"If she dies, it's on you," I reminded him.

"She's already dead," he pointed out.

"Drain her, do what you do. If she dies, our secrets will be revealed, and it will be on you. Sebastian was yours, and you couldn't control him. He shared our secrets with her, and she's given the keys to her editor. If she disappears, then our world as we know it crumbles. You can't claim *not* to be complicit. One thing I know about you vampires is that you're serious about your offspring and how their actions affect your standing. Do the right thing. Save our world."

We glared at each other.

His shoulders slumped. As if gathering resolve, he straightened, looked at the both of us, and said, "Leave my home."

I let out a long breath and looked at Rafael.

He looked just as disappointed as I felt. He moved to pick up Charlie's body.

"Leave her," Ibrahim ordered. "I will take care of it."

A flicker of hope lit within me. "You'll turn her?"

"Yes," the vampire said. His expression was stoic.

"She'll need to call her editor to not run the story," Rafael warned him.

Ibrahim ignored him, speaking to me. "Close the door or what you can of it when you leave."

We left the dead journalist with the vampire, hoping we had done the right thing.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Leon stared at the two of us. "So you're telling me that you let Sebastian escape and you handed over the dead reporter to Ibrahim with the instructions to turn her into a vampire?"

"Yes," I answered when Rafael didn't say anything.

"And her editor has a copy of the story that he might run if she doesn't show up," Leon clarified.

"Yes," I said again.

"And you don't know the timeline for turning a vampire, correct?"

"No. Do you?" I asked him.

Leon turned around and grabbed a stress ball from a basket of them. He crushed it in his fist. It exploded into fluff.

I jumped at the sound. Rafael didn't. I wondered if this was a common occurrence for the shifter.

"I'll find him. I think I know where he is," I told Leon.

"Then why are you here?" Leon asked me. He took another stress ball. "Go get him!"

As soon as we left Leon's office, Rafael asked lightly, "Where do you think your ex-boyfriend is at the moment?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, he's my ex-boyfriend now? Is this your way of telling me you're mad at me?"

"I wouldn't dream of it," Rafael said.

I stared at him suspiciously, but he kept his expression blank. I fluffed my hair. "There's a special showing of *Casablanca*. He loves that movie. I'll bet you anything he's there."

Rafael watched me thoughtfully. He nodded and stretched out his hand. "Done. I'll take a dinner date, thank you very much. What would you like if you win?"

"Come on." I laughed.

He raised an eyebrow, his hand still waiting for me. "What would you like?"

I thought carefully about it and said, "A fantasy."

Rafael gave me a crooked grin. "Okay, a dinner date or a fantasy. Let's see which one of us wins."

We shook hands, and I hid a smile.

I somehow convinced Rafael to let me go in alone. It was Friday. That was when Sebastian and I had usually gone to the cinema. I scanned

the dim theater and saw that Sebastian was sitting alone. I slipped into the chair beside him. He glanced at me. He didn't seem surprised to see me there.

"Are you ready for the world to change, Aisha?" he asked me, his eyes still on the screen.

I shook my head. "It's not going to change, Sebastian."

"You never had the imagination to see what could happen. Your mother fed you too much paranoia. She raised you on fear and suspicion. But there's always hope. There's always a new world waiting to be created, even if sacrifices have to be made." His face was rapt on the screen, watching Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.

"No," I said. "I meant that the world isn't going to change in the way you meant."

He turned his head sharply. "What do you mean?"

"We saved her." I couldn't hide the note of satisfaction in my voice.

"Impossible." He didn't believe me. "I ripped her throat out. There's no way she could have recovered from that. She died."

"She did die." I let the unspoken words linger in the air.

Sebastian slumped in his seat. "You took her to Ibrahim."

"Yes."

Sebastian had failed. Ibrahim had sent me an email just minutes before I stepped into the movie theater: Charlie had gotten in touch with her editor, and we were safe. For now.

He sighed. "Well, at least I can say that I tried to make the world a better place. What have you done?"

I didn't answer him. Instead, I raised my hand and several Alliance agents swooped in and apprehended him. He remained calm and silent as an agent cuffed his hands behind his back. I watched and remained seated. It was over.

Rafael slipped into seat next to me. "Looks like a good movie."

"You've never seen it?" I asked him.

"No, I'm not really a fan of black-and-white movies." Rafael waited a beat. "So it looks like you won. Want to tell me what your fantasy is?"

I turned to face him. "I'd like you to take me out to dinner."

A slow smile spread across his features. "When?"

"Now." I grabbed his hand and pulled him out of his seat.

We left La Barceloneta and walked over to the marina to my favorite seafood restaurant. We discussed what we thought was going to happen with Sebastian. Leon had told us that he would check in with Ibrahim. I tried to enjoy our time but for some reason I kept thinking of my upcoming battle with the Enforcer.

Chapter Forty-Eight

After my dinner date with Rafael, I spent the night over at his place. In the morning, I passed by Ibrahim's house. He had repaired the door but didn't open it for me. He told me through the door to stay away from him. I asked about Charlie, and he said she was as well as she could be. Leon had assured us that he would follow up with that situation, so I backed off and left. Since I was tying up loose ends, I decided it was about time to show up at the bounty office and say goodbye. Talking to Sandra had been hard enough, but Javier seemed to be taking it worse than she was.

"I just want to understand why you quit," Javier asked me.

"I didn't quit," I said.

"The Alliance contacted me and told me if I gave you one more job, they'd take away my license and shut my office down. Why? What did you do?"

"Would you believe they're forcing me to go on that vacation you told me to take?" I grinned at the dwarf.

He blinked quickly as if holding back tears and shook his head. "I don't think anyone can force you to take a break. You're a hard worker. I'm going to miss having you on my roster."

"I'm going to miss working for the best boss ever."

He smiled at my words.

I wished Javier a goodbye and walked out of his office. I left the bounty office feeling more than a little drained. It had been more emotional than I'd expected. And it felt strange that I would no longer be walking down that hallway to ask for the latest bounties. That part of my life was over.

I was lost in my thoughts when someone walked up behind me. I moved to the side so they could pass, but they kept pace with me. I glanced at the man and stumbled. He reached out a hand and steadied me. I halted in place. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

Diego scowled down at me. He still had that lock of hair falling across his forehead. I resisted the urge to brush it away. He'd probably bite my hand off if I did anyways. "I warned you about coming after my shifters."

"I didn't." I had been around vampires.

"Then why was your scent all over my castle?"

"You must be mistaken."

"You're questioning my sense of smell?" His voice could have frozen water. It was a grave insult to say that to a shifter. An insult that someone could be challenged over.

I closed my eyes and counted to five. I opened them again. "I'm just saying you must be mistaken."

"Are you that eager to start the challenge? You know you won't be walking away from that, right?"

Without the bounty assignments and assassinations, life was bound to get boring. A challenge with the Enforcer sounded like the most interesting thing that could happen in my near future. I grinned at Diego. "Actually, I can't wait."

The leader of the dragon shifters blinked at me. "You must be insane. There's no other explanation for it."

"You can't use that excuse to get out of the challenge. I'm still doing it," I warned him with a growing smile.

He shook his head. "Crazier than a bat."

I started walking and gave him a sideways glance as he picked up the pace beside me. "Where are you going?" I asked him.

"To the Alliance. I need to tell them that there's a crazy witch on the loose who needs to be locked up. She's a danger to the community."

I laughed. "They already know."

"It's going to be a long two years," he said.

"Yes, but it's better than jail. I—" I halted mid-stride, turning to him in shock. "Wait, how did you know that?"

The dragon shifter kept walking.

I jogged to catch up with him. "How did you know that?" I asked when I caught up with him.

Diego shot me a sideways look. "It was the best solution to the problem."

I gaped at him. He had orchestrated this. All of this. It explained why Leon had caved in to my demands so easily. Leon was under Diego's orders. I thought the Alliance shifters didn't fall under the leader of the shifters, but it appeared I was wrong. Very wrong. Leon ultimately reported to Diego. As if seeing the missing pieces fall into place in my mind, Diego smiled smugly. "With my shifters keeping an eye on you, you won't be running around the city killing any more of them."

Fire and brimstone.

“But—” I paused with a frown. “Didn’t Leon mention the self-defense clause?”

His smug smile disappeared. Thunder appeared on his brow.

I gave him a wink before I turned and strolled away from the pissed-off shifter. Hidden from Diego’s view, I allowed a wide grin to

spread across my face. It was going to be an interesting two years.

THE END…FOR NOW…

Thank you for reading SUPERNATURAL SHADOW. Kindly consider leaving a review if you enjoyed the book or tell a friend about it.